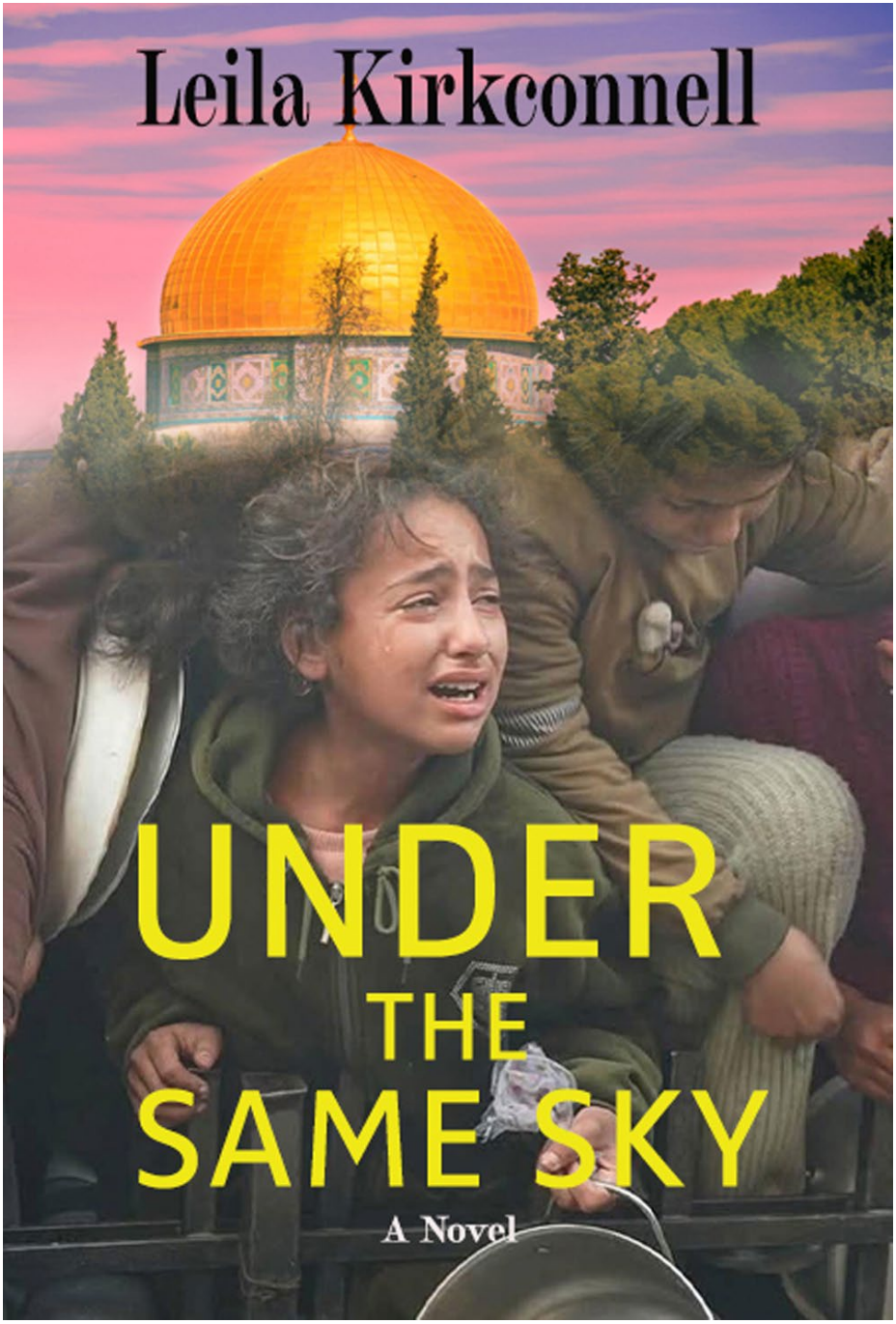
Leila Kirkconnell
UNDER
THE
SAME SKY
A Novel

Under the Same Sky

A Novel

Leila Kirkconnell

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ISBN-13:979-8-9931915-0-8

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"Gaza Interlude." This Week in Palestine # 307, November 2023. First published in a slightly different version as "Gaza's Broken Blessing," Al Jadid Vol. 19 No. 68, 2015.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Trigger Warning—This book's content will discuss multiple forms of trauma, including war, lack of food, and mental health. This might be challenging and cause discomfort. The reader's responsibility is to take care of their mental well-being and seek professional support if needed.

Dedication

This book and its proceeds support "HEAL Palestine" for their tireless dedication to saving Palestinian children.

"They destroyed my house first. Then they killed many members of my family and so many friends and students. Then they destroyed my city and the refugee camp. They destroyed everything beautiful in my life." — Mosab Abu Toha

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Gaza Interlude
by Lisa Suhair Majaj

The day the bombs paused long enough
for fishermen to set to sea, casting their nets
across blockaded waves, the sky above

shone brilliant, blue as the salty horizon
barring escape, bright as the galaxies beyond
where daystars burn. Boats clustered together,

men spoke quietly. Suddenly the calm
exploded: a torrent of shimmering scales
bursting in blessing, wild tumult of joy,

fish flinging themselves from salty depths
to waiting hulls, twisting through air
in a bright ballet, fountain of starbursts.

Later, when the laden boats returned to shore,
the bombs had not yet begun again to fall.
Children gathered, lips crusted with salt,

stroking the silvery bodies that promised food.
Far off, blue expanses of safety shimmered
like a mirage: wavering, breaking.

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Prologue

"Our scars are not just wounds—they are maps of survival, etched into our skin by a history that refuses to let us forget."
— Susan Abulhawa (Mornings in Jenin)

"Aw," her tiny voice blended with the chaos. "You're hurting me."

Tears pooled and spilled down her ruddy cheeks, caked with the grime of days without a bath.

"Enough pushing and shoving," I said, but my heart wasn't in the command. How could it be when I knew those big pots would only feed a few hundred?

"What's your name, sweetie?" I asked.

She hiccuped a sob, sniffled, and, with her gaze on the ground, said, "Majeda."

"That's a pretty name for a pretty girl. How old are you?"

Majeda raised five fingers and said, "Four," with a whistle escaping missed teeth.

I knew little about children but guessed she was neither four nor five. Majeda had to be younger.

My soul twisted. Did I dare ask why she was in the food line alone? Then, my gaze fell on the other kids, their plastic bowls, pots, pans, and even cups, as they shuffled their bare feet in the sand, not by choice, while patiently waiting for the few ladles we could spare.

Against better judgment, I said, "Pst…pst," trying to get her attention.

The girl focused on scooping sand with her tiny toes and digging them in to cover them up.

"Pst… Majeda…"

Green eyes, half-covered with curly, golden hair, met my gaze. Majeda's dark skin peeked through tattered clothes as she finally looked up.

I motioned for her to get closer, with a finger against my lips, coaxing her not to speak.

The Charity Kitchens organization was strict:

- One meal per person: To ensure fair distribution, kitchens often limit recipients to a single portion per visit.
- Bring your own container: People typically carry plastic or aluminum pots to collect food, as kitchens rarely provide packaging.
- Meal timing and rationing: Charity Kitchens serve meals at set times, and food is rationed to stretch supplies across thousands of people.
- No guaranteed service: Due to supply shortages, Charity Kitchens may shut down without notice or serve fewer people than expected.
- Security and crowd control: In areas with high desperation, kitchens may enforce crowd control measures to prevent looting or chaos.

What I was doing was not only against the rules, but it was also unethical to play favoritism. Majeda was just one child among many standing in line.

With trepidation, she stepped out of line and looked back. I had no doubt she wondered if my distraction would cause her to lose the spot she'd held for hours. Yet, she approached. Maybe she hadn't been robbed of the last shreds of hope and trust.

"Where did you get this from?" I asked, pointing to the jagged-edged plastic container.

Majeda shrugged and held my gaze.

I ladled rice and bean stew, filling her makeshift bowl. "Hold it with both hands," I instructed.

My words floated in the ocean breeze, and the mist caught the syllables. In the blink of an eye, the child had vanished. I stared after her mirage for the longest time until someone nudged me.

"We don't have time for daydreaming, Emad," a World Kitchen worker told me. "There are hundreds, thousands like her. You can't afford to become entangled."

I shook my head at his detachment and went back to filling bowls and containers, but my insides screamed at the injustice dealt to Palestinians. How much more could one endure? There was no fresh water, no electricity, and very little food.

Immersing myself in ladling food, I avoided further eye contact.

My back ached, and my legs went numb from standing and bending in the same position. Feeling sorry for myself or focusing on my tired, twenty-two-year-old body wasn't an option. I was alive among the dead and dying, and I couldn't predict how much longer that would last.

1 — Inshallah, But Not For Me

"I was just a 21-year-old trying to live my life. I worked, hung out with friends, and always dreamed of a better tomorrow. Now, I find myself doing things and knowing things I never knew – how to carry an injured person, the right way to bury people, what kind of formula babies need, how to make food out of anything and everything. I never thought I would spend all my days trying to help people survive. My view of life has changed. I have seen things that will always haunt me forever."
— Hossam Shabat

Now…

Hossam's words whirled in my mind. The only difference between us? I was still here. Maybe wherever he had gone was better. This wasn't a life… not even an existence.

I was a university student majoring in civil engineering in my third year of study, and living in an open-air prison for eighteen years was Hell. Still, we didn't truly understand what Hell looked like until the newest wave of ethnic cleansing and genocide took its toll on old and young alike.

Was I a good student? I'd tell you, "Ask my father," but I still couldn't find his bones. They were buried in the rubble of a building we called home.

My father returned to retrieve a house key my grandfather had given him as a symbolic proof that we owned our land and home, which had been stolen from us in 1948. My father still hoped to return… one day… *Inshallah*.

Now, he'd joined his ancestors in the 'dust to dust… ashes to ashes…'

I ladled one more bowl and looked at the never-ending line of children, most of them the only survivors, caring for even younger ones. The remaining pots were emptying as quickly as mine.

What will happen to the children who don't receive food? It played in an endless loop in my mind.

I knew the answer.

As I scraped the bottom of the pot, my hands moved on autopilot as my mind was transported to another time.

2 — The Nets and the Horizon

Fisherman I am,
My heart is crafting disillusionment.
Just like my hand was crafted to cast a fishing reel.
— Omar Moussa

Then…

The Mediterranean stretched endlessly before us, its waves shimmering under the early morning sun. My father's boat rocked gently in the shallows, its weathered wood creaking with each movement. I was no older than four, clutching a stick with a string tied to its end, pretending to fish like Baba.

"Baba… Baba… look!" I called out, eager to show him my catch: a small fish dangling from the end of my makeshift rod.

But my father's gaze remained fixed on the horizon, where large Israeli ships patrolled the sea like predators.

He heaved a net loaded with wriggling fish into the boat with deliberate and practiced movements.

Disappointed, I repeated my plea, tugging at his sleeve. "Baba, look!"

He finally turned, his face softening as he ruffled my hair. "We can eat a good meal tonight, my son," he said.

I beamed, releasing the fish into a bucket of water, mimicking his every move.

But even then, I noticed the tension in his shoulders, the way his eyes darted toward the horizon. The sea was a source of life, but the Israeli patrol boats loomed closer, a constant reminder of the danger that shadowed our livelihood.

"Abu Emad," Muhammad called from a nearby fishing boat.

My father looked up, his expression darkening.

"We'd better get back," Muhammad said, pointing at the approaching ships.

My father nodded but didn't respond. He secured the net and began rowing toward the shore.

"Baba?" I asked, trembling as bullets splashed into the water near our boats.

"Stay down, Emad."

Trembling, I asked, "Why are they doing this?"

"Because they are evil." Then, he muttered, "Zionist devils."

I didn't understand what he was saying at first, but the fear that seized me kept me silent. It wasn't long before I understood the significance of his two words, the words that would become the curse of our lives.

When we reached the shore, my father unloaded his catch and arranged the fish on an ice display on makeshift tables made from wooden planks resting on the uneven sandy ground. The air carried the sharp tang of salt and the scent of the sea.

Vendors, including my father, dressed in aprons stained with sea brine, shouted prices, their rhythmic voices blending with the waves lapping at the shore.

Locals from the Beach refugee camp wandered through, bargaining for a better deal. In the shallow water, a small boat bobbed, acting as an impromptu stall, its fisherman selling his haul straight from the deck.

Even as a small child, I never tired of our morning routine. I stirred awake before dawn at the faint call of the muezzin blending with my mother's rustling in the kitchen. My father gently nudged me, pulling me from the warmth of the blanket.

"Emad," my mother called. "Come eat breakfast."

Baba was already seated at the table as the muezzin made his last call to prayer in the distance.

I joined him while my mother poured tea and skillfully removed the bread she had heated over the open flame with her bare fingers, blowing on it as she placed three loaves beside the colorful array of

cracked pickled olives, olive oil, za'atar, tomatoes, and cucumbers, which decorated the porcelain dishes with blue trim.

"Sit," Baba said to my mother.

"I'll eat later," she said with a smile as she tightened the scarf around her face. "You need your strength, Abu Emad. A long day ahead."

As a young boy, I thought Abu Emad (Emad's father) was my father's name, and Um Emad was my mother's. It wasn't until I was older that I realized they had 'other' names, which were titles given to them because I was their first boy. Baba's name was Younes, and my mother's name was In'am. However, I rarely heard anyone call them by their actual names.

The air was cool, carrying the scent of salt and seaweed as we stepped out into the quiet streets. I clutched a lantern that my mother had lit and handed to me; its flickering light would guide us to the shore.
Baba tightened his keffiyeh, tying a knot in the back to keep it in place, and raised my jacket's collar to shield my neck from the cold.

"Allah be with you," Mother called. "Listen to Baba, Emad. Do as he says," she added.

"Take care of yourself, Um Emad, while we're gone," Father instructed.

We walked the ten-minute trail in silence. Later, over the years, I came to understand why my father never spoke to me. He was busy praying for a good catch day, hoping his nets would be full and that he would earn enough to meet our daily needs and continue working to replace our makeshift tin house with an asbestos roof with something more permanent.

So far, the kitchen had been finished, where we ate our meals. Baba bought a propane stove, replacing the kerosene burner, and Mother now had a stone sink with running water and two cupboards to store supplies. She was proud of her kitchen, which had become the talk of the camp, and Father wanted to build the rest of the house.

The weathered but sturdy boat rocked gently in the shallows. I watched my father's rough hands, worn from years of labor, guide us as we loaded the nets and prepared for the day's work.

My small fingers mimicked Baba's practiced movements, tying knots and securing lines, as the Mediterranean stretched endlessly before us while we pushed off into the water.

Sunrise painted the horizon in shades of orange and pink as Baba cast the nets, with the splash breaking the morning stillness.

In later years, when I was out of school, I took on the task as my father instructed me every step of the way. Although I was an experienced fisherman by then, I never said a word, swallowed my pride, and was grateful that my father was in good health and still able to fish.

I learned when it was safe to fish and how to dodge random bullets meant to harass and stop us from earning a living from fishing, as it was one of the few ways left to do so.

Aside from feeling a surge of pride when pulling the nets heavy with the sea's bounty, it was a tradition and a way of life passed down through generations.

3 — Chalk Dust and War Dust

"Life doesn't get easier or more forgiving, we get stronger and more resilient." — Steve Maraboli

Then…

The morning air was heavy with the scent of salt and smoke, a reminder of the sea and the war that surrounded us.

My mother's voice broke through the haze of sleep. "Emad, time to get up."

I rubbed my eyes, tossing the blanket aside. The foam mattress on the floor was enough, and I was told to be grateful because others didn't even have one. But today, I didn't feel grateful. I felt tired of not having what others did.

With her big belly, Mama leaned against the doorframe, rubbing her back. The murmuring let me know I would have a sister or brother soon. *Please, God, let it be a brother so I can play with him*.

A sister would not do. Why? I couldn't articulate in those days.

Mom trudged to the wardrobe, pulled out my new shirt, socks, and pants, and told me to wash up and get dressed. "Your new shoes are by the door."

"They'll get fishy," I protested.

"Did you forget? You're going to school today. It's your first day to be a big boy, Emad. Yalla, get ready."

"Yalla this, Yalla that," I grumbled at the 'Hurry up.'

I wanted to protest. I wanted to tell her I didn't want to go to school, that I wanted to be with Baba on the boat, where the sea felt endless and free. But her expression left no room for argument. I sealed my lips, washed up, and got dressed.

Breakfast was simple: a labneh sandwich with cucumbers, tomatoes, and olives.

My father's chair was empty, as it always was in the mornings. He was already at the shore, casting nets into waters that were as dangerous as they were bountiful.

"Eat," my mother urged, her hands busy tidying the kitchen. "You'll need your strength."

I nodded, chewing slowly, the tang of the labneh mixing with the bitterness in my chest. I missed Baba. I missed the sea. But today, I would step into a different world; a world of chalk dust and war dust.

The UNRWA school was a patchwork of hope and despair. Bullet holes scarred the walls, and the blackboards had cracks that spidered across their surfaces. The desks were mismatched, with some missing legs and others held together with tape. But the teachers stood tall, their voices steady as they welcomed us.

"Good morning, students," said Miss Amal, smiling despite the chaos outside. "Today, we learn about resilience."

Resilience. The word felt heavy, like the sandbags that lined the streets. I didn't know what it meant, but I wanted to understand.

Miss Amal handed out coloring books, and my heart sank when I realized I had to share mine with the boy sitting next to me. I wanted one of my own.

Tears stung my eyes, but I blinked them away. "You're a man," Baba always said. "Men don't cry."

At lunch, I sat under a tree with two boys from our neighborhood. They pulled out small containers of food, their portions even smaller than mine. I offered them a piece of my sandwich, and they accepted it with quiet gratitude.

"Do you think the war will end soon?" one of them asked.

I didn't answer. I didn't know how to.

The afternoon passed quickly, but the weight of the day lingered. We sang songs about Palestine, played games that felt hollow, and listened to Miss Amal talk about the importance of education.

"Even in the darkest times," she said, "knowledge is our light."

Her words stayed with me as I walked home in the early afternoon.

The streets were quiet, save for the distant hum of drones. I clutched my backpack tightly, the chalk dust from the classroom still clinging to my fingers.

When I reached home, my mother was waiting at the gate, her eyes scanning the road for Baba. “How was school?” she asked.

I hesitated, then said, “It was good.”

She smiled, but her eyes betrayed her worry. “Your father will be home soon.”

I nodded, stepping inside. The scent of jasmine greeted me, mingling with the faint smell of kerosene from the stove. I sat at the kitchen table, staring at my chalk-dust-covered hands.

“Go wash up,” my mother said.

I hesitated, not wanting to rid myself of the promise that I could learn, that I could build, that I could create something better. But the war dust outside reminded me of the fragility of that promise.

That night, as I lay on my foam mattress, I thought about Miss Amal’s words. “Knowledge is our light.”

But what happens when the light is snuffed out by war? What happens when the chalk dust is replaced by war dust?

I didn’t have answers. But I knew one thing: I would keep learning. I would keep hoping.

A typical school day at our refugee camp elementary school highlighted the community’s struggles and resilience under the harsh Israeli occupation, which deprived us of essentials like power and water. Access to food and medical supplies became difficult until the fedayeen (our freedom fighters) dug tunnels to get what we needed to survive.

The list of items the Zionists considered contraband was extensive, including construction materials like cement, steel, and wood, as well as electronics, such as certain communication devices and equipment. Agricultural supplies, such as fertilizers, were also banned. Medical

equipment, including advanced medical devices, as well as goods such as chocolate, spices, and certain toys, were prohibited.

Our school days started with morning assemblies, where we gathered for announcements, a recitation of the national anthem, or a motivational talk.

Students attended lessons in core subjects like Arabic, mathematics, science, and social studies. Overcrowded classrooms often lacked resources such as textbooks and teaching aids. Teachers had to be creative in engaging students despite limited resources.

We had a short break that let us play and socialize, although playgrounds were often small or nonexistent. Many children brought simple snacks from home. Some of the students' fathers weren't around, and I was fortunate so far. The Israelis either killed or imprisoned them.

The second half of the day continued with additional classes and concluded early in the afternoon, particularly in schools with double or triple shifts to accommodate all students.

In third grade, I became hyper-aware of the devastation the blockade had wreaked havoc on us and why Gaza was called an open-air prison.

UNRWA schools faced significant challenges, many caused by the ongoing blockade and the aftermath of Israeli military operations, particularly the "Pillar of Defense" in November 2012, which resulted in widespread destruction and trauma.

Bullets left marks on the school walls; even the blackboards had holes, and the oppressor's aggression disrupted education. This forced UNRWA to operate in makeshift or overcrowded facilities. With a growing refugee population and limited resources, classrooms were often overcrowded, which negatively affected the quality of education.

Ongoing attacks traumatized us, along with the lack of food, water, and almost no electricity. Even a book falling to the floor made us jump. Every sound seemed to remind us of the reality outside: bombs, bullets…

Teachers were often ill-equipped to handle the psychological impact. Still, they did their best to maintain a positive learning environment, despite underfunding that limited access to educational materials, teacher training, and infrastructure repairs.

Along with exploding bombs and sniper attacks, the blockade and restrictions on Gaza significantly limited the movement of goods and people, making it difficult to rebuild schools and supply essential items.

Despite these challenges, we remained steadfast in our belief in the power of education. We drew strength from our collective determination, emphasizing resilience and the importance of education even during times of crisis.

Education became our hope, reminding us of the need to preserve the Palestinian spirit, even as the world around us was falling apart.

4 — A Sister in the Storm

"I paint my sister's face in watermelon hues—red, green, black. A flag that no soldier can burn." — Malak Mattar (Gazan artist)

Then…

I trudged through muddy streets, eager to get home to warmth and my mother's cooking, with my backpack covering my head.

"Yalla, move it!"

Hakeem, the older neighborhood boy tasked with walking me home from school, kept nudging me to move faster, but my frozen feet wouldn't cooperate.

As we neared the house, a sound cut through the rain. It was a wail, raw and jagged, like an animal caught in a trap.

My stomach dropped.

I threw my backpack by the door and bolted toward the noise, but before I could reach the bedroom, a neighbor woman, Um Yusuf, grabbed my shoulders, her fingers digging in. "Go play next door," she instructed.

"Why? What's wrong with Mama?"

"Never mind. She's fine. Go play."

She hesitated, her eyes flickering toward the closed door where Mama's cries twisted into something worse, a sob that didn't sound human.

Confused, I hurried to the bedroom, where another woman stood in my way.

"I want Mama," I cried as Mama's sobs continued behind the closed door.

"She's busy, Emad. Now, do as you're told. Em Hasan is waiting for you next door."

"But I don't want to!" I stomped my foot in exasperation.

If they wouldn't let me see Mama, I'd find Baba.

I spun and ran for the street, toward the docks where the fishermen hauled in their nets, but Hakeem caught me before I made it ten steps, dragging me to Em Hasan's house with a tight grip.

"Mabrook, Emad."

Em Hasan's congratulations were confusing. I looked at her, puzzled.

Darkness had descended, and the kerosene lamp cast its usual dancing ghosts on the whitewashed walls. I had no idea what time it was, but I felt it was past my bedtime.

"You have a sister," she continued. "You can go home and—"

I dashed out the door before she could finish her sentence, wondering if that was why my mother had screamed. Did she not want a girl, too?

The house was eerily quiet when I entered.

Baba stood in the center of the room, his face unreadable. He opened his arms, and I crashed into him, but his hug was stiff as if he were holding himself together.

"Baba, can I see her?" I whispered.

His hand trembled against my hair. "Maybe tomorrow. Mama is tired."

Tired? Mama had never been too tired for me before.

"What's her name?" I asked.

"Amina," Baba said with a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

Amina…Safe. Protected.

I didn't see her that night.

But I heard her.

Amina's cries were weak, a thin, reedy sound, like a bird fallen from its nest.

And then, the whispers started.

"She's too small."

"Her breathing—"

"Allah yustur, something's not right."

Amina was born on January 2nd, 2009, during Operation Cast Lead. I was too young to understand its impact beyond the fear that froze me and rooted me to the ground with each explosion.

The world outside our home seemed turned upside down, a storm of fire and chaos that wouldn't cease. During those days, I clung to my mother's hand, feeling her fear through the tension in her grip, even though she tried to hide it behind a calm voice and soothing words.

My sister's name meant "safe" or "protected," as she was born after a difficult birth and amid the background soundtrack of Israeli attacks and destruction.

The hospitals were unsafe and lacked electricity and essential medical supplies. My parents later recalled debating whether to undertake the perilous journey. Each explosion that shook the streets increased the risks. So, my mother gave birth to Amina in a room lit only by a kerosene lamp, its smell a comforting presence of light.

Amina didn't cry much. She didn't crawl, didn't babble, didn't reach for Mama's fingers like I had.

She didn't say "Mama" or "Baba" when we encouraged her to do so eagerly. I didn't fully understand what this meant at the time, but I could see the worry on my parents' faces and hear it in their whispers when they thought I wasn't listening.

I'd sit beside her, my hand on her tiny chest, feeling the uneven flutter of her breath.

"Why doesn't she look at me?" I asked once.

Mama's face crumpled before she smoothed it into a smile. "She does, habibi. In her own way."

But I saw the truth in the way Baba stared at the wall some nights, in the way Mama's prayers grew louder and more desperate.

Amina was different.

And in Gaza, being different was dangerous.

But for me, Amina was perfect. My heart fluttered whenever she looked at me with her big, brown eyes. I no longer wished for a brother, a wish I had stubbornly clung to before she arrived.

Amina became the center of my universe, a source of light during the dark days that followed. I took it upon myself to protect her, even though I was just a child.

I would sit beside her, my small hand resting softly on her blanket as if my presence alone could keep her safe.

I held her close during airstrikes, wrapping my arms tightly around her as if I could shield her from the outside world.

She didn't follow the same milestones as other kids, but she had a way of making her presence felt in beautiful ways. Her giggles were rare but precious, like the first rain after a long drought—life-giving and pure. I would do anything to make her laugh, whether that was pulling funny faces or telling her stories I made up on the spot.

Amina had a favorite spot in the house, by the window where the sunlight streamed in during the afternoons. She would sit there for hours, her gaze fixed on the world outside. I often wondered what she saw, what thoughts filled her mind.

Sometimes, Amina pointed to the sky, her tiny finger tracing the flight path of a bird, because Amina loved the birds. She'd stare at them for hours, her small fingers pressed to the glass, her eyes wide with something I couldn't name.

Wonder?

Longing?

In those moments, I swore to her that I would give her a world where she could fly.

Where she would never be afraid.

But sometimes, when the house was quiet, I'd catch Mama crying.

And I'd hear the words she thought no one else could hear:

"What will happen to her when we're gone?"

And I'd squeeze Amina tighter, as if my arms could keep the future at bay.

5 — A Loaf to Share

"We all die 100 times every day," Suad Al Zurai said. "We die 100 times daily from fear and horror."

Now…

"Emad?"

The voice was cracked, brittle like dry earth splitting under the sun.

I turned.

"Is that you, Abu al-lail?" he asked.

My breath caught. Only one person still called me Father of the Night, an old nickname from sleepless university days, when Mazen and I would huddle over our phones, dreaming of places we'd never see: Santorini. Cyprus. Turkey. We'd laugh at our foolishness, then stay up until dawn anyway, chasing the glow of borrowed lives on stolen internet signals.

But the man before me was not the Mazen I remembered.

His cheeks were hollowed, his beard patchy and wild. His eyes—once bright with mischief—were now empty, like bullet holes in a crumbling wall.

Do I look like that, too?

I had no mirror. Maybe it was better not to know.

"Where are you staying?" I asked, as if we were tourists comparing hotels instead of refugees counting tent numbers.

Mazen's throat worked before he spoke. "Abu Omar… his whole family…"

I blinked. I'd missed half his words.

What about Abu Omar?

I didn't ask and kept my thoughts to myself. More than likely, they are dead and buried or were buried alive under the rubble. Did it even matter how they vanished?

"Did you hear what I said?"

I shook my head.

He pointed toward the sea of tents, their frayed tarps flapping like wounded birds. "They're over there."

I should've felt something…relief, grief, anything. But my heart was a stone. "That's good."

We exchanged scraps of information—the same old phones. No service. No news worth sharing.

Then, just as he turned to leave, he asked, "You wouldn't… have a loaf of bread to spare?"

His voice broke on the word bread.

"Wait right here."

I walked a few feet to the 'staging' area, a joke of a name for the corner where we stacked whatever meager supplies hadn't been stolen or spoiled.

The bread was flat. Stale. The kind we'd have thrown away in another life.

But here, it was gold.

I handed it to Mazen.

His fingers twitched as if his pride and hunger were at war before he finally took it.

"Shukran, Abu al-lail. It isn't for me."

I waved him off. "We're all grains of the same sand now."

I didn't ask who it was for. A child? A dying parent? It didn't matter. Hunger had made us all the same.

As he disappeared into the crowd, I watched his back, which was once straight with the confidence of a future doctor, now bent like an old man's.

My gaze followed him as he weaved through the crowd, which pushed and shoved its way through with empty containers while we prepared the pots of rice and beans.

Mazen, whose posture was once tall and proud, was now hunched over like an old man, the weight of the years on his shoulders.

We didn't chat much beyond the few words we exchanged. What was there left to say?

A sob yearning to escape choked me as I continued to stir the pot, now bubbling on a slow fire.

I stirred the rice and beans, the steam stinging my eyes.

Or maybe it was the memory:

—Mazen, grinning, stealing fries off my plate at the café near campus.

—Us whispering "One day, we'll eat real baklava in Istanbul."

—The way he'd split a loaf with me back then, not out of desperation, but because sharing was easy.

Now, bread wasn't food.

It was currency.

It was power.

It was the difference between a child's whimper and silence.

A sob clawed up my throat. I let the steam blame my wet cheeks.

6 — Between Equations and Exile

"Teach your sister to read, so she can write your eulogy if they silence you first." — Refaat Alareer (Gazan writer, killed in 2023)

Then…

"Project Description," Dr. Hani Hamoudi wrote on the board. "An Analysis and Design of Illar Basic Girls' School."

He turned to face us. "The building has seven floors: two basement floors and five above the ground. It includes classrooms, laboratories, and meeting rooms, and the fourth floor is a stage."

Mazen and I exchanged glances. This was the fun we had been waiting for after months of manual calculations.

He elbowed me. "We get to use ETABS and AUTOCAD," Mazen whispered.

Tools to simulate stability, as if we'd ever get to build something that wouldn't be rubble within a decade.

Karma, two seats over, turned and glared at us. Her hijab was pinned neatly, her sharp eyes dissecting my immaturity.

I wiggled my eyebrows.

She exhaled through her nose, a silent "Grow up."

Karma turned to face the teacher with a "Pfft" under her breath.

She was not shy and had, in no uncertain terms, put me in my place in the past when I was out of line. Bold, intelligent, and beautiful, she was the epitome of the Palestinian woman.

I was infatuated.

"You'll never measure up to her," Mazen would tease when I stared into the distance, awestruck.

He was right. But dreaming was free.

We daydreamed about everything, from traveling and buying the shirt I saw on my phone's screen to having running water and reliable electricity.

Mazen and I played the 'what if' game daily, our voices dropping to whispers between lectures:

"What if we drove to Egypt, boarded a plane to Greece?"

"What if the checkpoint soldiers didn't laugh as they turned us back?"

"What if we never smelled kerosene again?"

"What if the sewers didn't flood our streets?"

"What if we didn't have to wait for a water truck to wash up and cook?

"What if we went to Czechoslovakia, earned our master's degrees, and found a job that paid enough for us to have enough to eat?

Then, the silent what-ifs. The ones that coiled around my ribs at night:

What if Amina didn't wake up gasping when the generator fumes seeped into her room?

What if I could fix Amina's trembling hands?

What if Karma looked at me like I was someone who could?

What if I made enough money to ease my father's aging burden of hauling nets and my mother's struggles with basic tasks?

Mazen smacked my arm and shifted his eyes to the professor. I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn't hear Dr. Hamoudi call on me.

"Good morning, Mr. Khaddouri. Nice of you to join us."

The class of twenty-third-year students erupted in laughter and snickers. I felt heat rise to my cheeks. Karma's disgusted glance cut deeper than their mockery.

"What did I miss?" I hissed without moving my lips.

Mazen pointed to an open page.

I missed the question or comment, but I had studied hard the night before and knew the material inside out.

After clearing my throat and flipping to the page Mazen had indicated, I straightened my back and asked, "With all due respect, could you please repeat your question?"

Dr. Hamoudi pointed to a student in the front row.

"It's on the board," Suha said, turning toward me.

I glanced at the blackboard and said, "Crushing Strength Test."

"Explain," said Dr. Hamoudi as if to trap me.

"It is used after curing — usually twenty-eight days—to assess the concrete's strength. It ensures the concrete meets structural requirements before being used for load-bearing elements like beams, columns, and slabs."

From the corner of my eye, I saw Karma glance my way every so slightly, which I hoped expressed impressed surprise.

Mazen shook his head and almost laughed aloud.

"You'd better pay attention. Next time, you won't be so lucky," he reminded me.

This was only the beginning of the first semester of my third year. The semester began with protests. Then the checkpoints closed. Then the drones returned, their buzz sawing through our lectures.

One Tuesday, the power died mid-class. Dr. Hamoudi continued to teach in the dark.

"Concrete," he said, tapping the board, "is only as strong as its weakest aggregate."

Outside, airstrikes thudded like a heartbeat.

Karma's voice cut through the gloom. "How do we design for this?" She gestured to the window, to the sky that rained fire.

No one answered.

I reminded myself why I was there and what my goal was: to earn a degree, find a job, help my family, possibly get married, and have a family of my own.

While I always loved math and buildings, engineering wasn't my dream. The common belief was that becoming a doctor or an engineer was the best way to achieve financial stability and social status. Families saved every penny for their children's future; education was a central part of Palestinian culture.

I also had another motivation. While we couldn't get a precise diagnosis for Amina, the lack of resources, such as medical care and

physical therapy, worsened her disabilities. I wanted to give her all the information I found online that wasn't available elsewhere.

In 2019, Mazen told me about a center for children with disabilities in Jerusalem, and I was eager to explore the options available. I emailed them that very day, unsure of what to expect because I was only a teenager with limited knowledge of the world.

Waiting for a response was more than I could handle.

"Why aren't they answering?" I asked.

"What did you expect?" Mazen spat when I showed him the rejection email. "They deny permits for chemotherapy. You think they care about a girl who can't hold a spoon?"

His words hit like a punch.

"Do you think you're the only one asking for help?" Mazen chided. "You're crazy. Look around you." Mazen spread his arms with a huff.

He was right. There were kids with disabilities in just about every other home. "What if I tell them…" I let my words trail.

There was no good option. If I told them Amina's situation was bad, they might not choose her because there could be others who were 'treatable.' If I told them she had improved, which she had, they would select someone else because they might think she no longer needed their help.

Even if the center accepted Amina, how would she travel? Who would take her?

Over half the requests were denied for 'security reasons.' What threat would Amina pose to an occupier with military strength?

Also, due to permit restrictions, most children traveling for treatment had to be accompanied by a grandmother or an aunt, not a parent, adding to the psychological burden on the child and violating their rights to access care and support from their parents.

That afternoon, I found Amina by the window, her palms pressed to the glass—a bird—a real one—perched on the rubble across the street.

She taped the window, excited.

I knelt beside her. "When I'm an engineer, I'll build you a tower where birds come to you."

She smiled. Then an explosion flashed in her pupils, and the bird fled.

A few weeks later, the university was hit.

7 — Salty Tears and Empty Pots

"Why are you crying?"
"The little girl replies, "Because I can't walk. My legs are bleeding, and we keep walking a lot. We don't know where to go."— anonymous child.

Now…

Amina and my mother slept soundly after a long night of explosions that rocked our core.

I slipped out of the tent, which hardly kept us dry from the weather, to brush my teeth in a sandy spot we had designated as a bathroom. The ground was rough, scattered with discarded wrappers, broken plastic, and sun-bleached bones of old sanitary pads half-buried like strange fossils.

A few steps away, the ground dipped into a shallow trench where dark liquid seeped through the sand, its surface shimmering with iridescent streaks of oil and grime.

The smell hit me in waves. First, the sharp punch of ammonia, then the heavy, sickly sweet rot of decomposing waste, and beneath it all, the nauseating musk of stagnant water breeding God-knows-what.

Flies clustered in dark clouds around the trench, their buzzing forming a constant, high-pitched whine.

When I shifted my weight, my sandal sank slightly into the mud, releasing a fresh puff of foul air. I could feel the dampness seeping through the worn rubber sole.

To my left, what remained of a cinderblock latrine stood like a crumbling tomb. Its door long gone, the interior streaked with rust-brown stains where desperate hands had braced against the walls.

Inside, the ceramic squat toilet was shattered, jagged edges jutting up like broken teeth, and the pit beneath it overflowed into a sluggish

brown river that snaked toward the tents. Someone had tried to cover the worst of it with a warped piece of corrugated metal, but that only forced the sewage to bubble up elsewhere, pooling around the base of a nearby utility pole where a tangle of exposed wires hissed in the damp.

A child's sandal floated upside down in one of the shallower puddles, its Velcro strap still fastened. Beyond it, a line of women waited with plastic buckets, their faces tight with exhaustion. One coughed violently into her sleeve, her shoulders shaking. The sound echoed off the sheets of scavenged tin that served as bathroom walls, amplifying the wet rattle in her lungs.

I squeezed the toothpaste tube, coaxing out another small glob. There wouldn't be more. This was a luxury we could no longer afford. I rinsed with a handful of water and turned to leave, as a few others stood around waiting for their turn.

I spat my toothpaste into the trench, watching the foam dissolve into the filth. The mint was a cruel joke. For a second, it almost masked the taste of bile rising in my throat.

Then the wind shifted, carrying the thick, greasy smoke from burning trash in the dumpsters near the camp's edge, and the illusion shattered.

My slippers sank into the ground as I trudged through a fog of exhaustion and sleep deprivation. How much longer could I keep putting one foot in front of the other, or care about what happened to me?

500 days.

500 days since the bombs drove us from the refugee camp to this city of tents and trembling, where the only things growing were the graves.

A rumbling drew my attention. Was it my stomach or someone else's?

To distract myself, I looked out at the distant shore where, just a few miles north, my father used to fish. Here, the boats rested like discarded toys drifting on the water, with waves pushing some further toward the horizon where menacing naval ships hide, and others farther along the shore to dry and become fuel for the next meal.

Weaving my way through the tents to reach ours, I overheard lamenting, crying, and praying for this to end. Whatever "this" was.

When I reached my family, the sun was rising over the horizon. We used to greet each other with "Good morning," but now barely a grunt escapes our lips. I no longer wonder if or when we will return to our simple routine, with breakfast of bread, olives, cheese, tomatoes, and tea. Those days are now just a distant memory, and I can't afford to dwell on them.

Passing our tent, I hesitated but didn't stop. The guilt gnawed at me because I should have been taking care of my mother and sister, but I no longer had the means to do so. Maybe I could bring home a loaf of bread and an onion after my volunteering shift.

For a while, I escaped into my books, reviewing formulas and learning how to brace a building in case of an earthquake. My mother used the last book as fuel to cook two tomatoes and one onion to feed Amina and herself.

I arrived at the kitchen, a lean-to serving as a makeshift shelter from the scorching sun. The line of children parted for me, their ribs pressing against their skin like ladder rungs.

Avoiding eye contact with anyone, I squeezed through the crowd to join the cooks.

The hum of activity began early, even before the sun fully rose over the horizon. The air vibrated with urgency. Small voices rose, overlapping into a chorus of pleading calls. Some shouted, while others simply murmured their hopes in breathless anticipation.

I started the morning by sorting donations: sacks of flour, canned goods, bags of spices, and whatever we could spare, we shared it all. The ingredients were valuable and carefully stretched to ensure each meal could serve as many people as possible. There was no room for waste.

Stirring large pots required strength, but it was the small moments, like passing a child a warm plate and seeing an elder's gratitude in their tired eyes, that fueled us.

Engineer! I thought of the distant dream.

I wouldn't be building schools. I was stirring gruel in a pot that would never be full enough.

The kitchen hummed with the lies we told ourselves:

This ladleful will be enough.

Tomorrow, the aid trucks will come.

Amina will wake up and say my name.

Ladles dipped, poured, and moved as quickly as hands could manage. Feet shuffled closer, tiny hands reaching and clutching bowls, sleeves, or anything that might hold the promise of the next meal.

I scraped the pot's charred bottom. The last portion of rice clung to the metal like a stubborn child to a cliff's edge.

Then came the shift—a pause. The clatter quieted, and the murmurs faded as the last portion disappeared.

The silence lasted only a moment before it shattered, and whispers of disappointment gave way to cries of frustration. Some children cried with hunger, confusion, and desperation. Others turned away in quiet defeat, their footsteps dragging as they retreated toward tents where empty stomachs would gnaw through the night.

The clanking pots, once full, now echoed emptily.

We looked at each other, guilt gnawing at me as I grabbed my reserved loaf and a bowl of stew to take to my mother and sister.

As the sun set, exhaustion settled into my bones, but tomorrow, we would do it all over again. And we would keep going because here, in this humble kitchen, every meal mattered.

Then a scream shattered the silence.

Not from hunger. Not from pain.

From the sky.

The world split open.

A concussion of heat and noise threw me to the ground. The kitchen's lean-to collapsed in a sigh of flame, scattering embers over the food sacks.

"Mother…Amina—!"

I ran.

The camp was a maze of fire and fleeing shadows. A woman clutched a limp toddler, his legs trailing like a doll's.

An old man knelt in the dirt, pressing his forehead to the ground as if praying, though his skull was split like a pomegranate.

Our tent was still standing.

But inside—

Amina lay curled on her side, her hands fluttering like wounded birds. Blood striped her temple where a shrapnel splinter had grazed her.

My mother wasn't screaming.

That was worse.

She cradled Amina's head in her lap, her lips moving in a silent "La ilaha illa Allah," her tears cutting tracks through the dust on her cheeks.

"We have to go," I urged.

Amina's eyes met mine. Her mouth opened—

A gurgle.

A whimper.

Not a word. Never a word.

I lifted her, her body too light, her limbs dangling like broken hinges.

Behind us, the tent city burned. Ahead was the sea.

The shore was a graveyard of fishing boats. The Israeli gunships lurked on the horizon, their spotlights scanning the water like hungry eyes.

"We can't," my mother begged.

8 — Shifting Gears

"Education is the foundation of our struggle. It is the means by which we empower ourselves and ensure our future."
— Hanan Ashrawi:

Then…

"You're nuts!" Mazen exclaimed when I told him I planned to switch majors.

"One more year, you idiot," he said.

If I switched to medicine, I'd have to start over, something we couldn't afford. But I wanted to help my sister. Mazen knew my reason.

"Look. Finish school, get a job, and you can help Amina."

My best friend made sense. Still, my heart ached for Amina.

I shook my head, staring at the blue sea.

Mazen nudged me with his elbow. "Meet me tonight. Maybe we can figure something out. Actually, I have a few ideas."

We parted ways, each heading to our respective classes. We had several lectures in common, and we would briefly meet to chat throughout the day.

"You're nuts!" Mazen's voice still rang in my ears as I took the stairs two at a time, my backpack slamming against my shoulders with each step.

One more year. His logic was sound. But logic didn't soothe the image of Amina's trembling hands struggling to lift a spoon to her lips that morning.

I turned the landing between the second and third floors.

A body collided with mine. Notes scattered like startled birds.

Karma.

Her dark eyes blazed up at me. "You're an idiot," she hissed, already crouching to gather her papers.

My throat tightened. “ I-I apologize.”

“With your shoulders hunched like a kicked dog,” she shot back, standing so close I could smell the lemon soap she used. “Do you apologize to walls, too?”

No one seemed to notice the exchange as they milled around, each on their way to lectures or breaks.

Time stood still.

Something in me snapped. “Clearly, you weren’t looking either,” I said, squaring my stance.

There was a beat. Then, her lips twitched.

“I didn’t think you had it in you.” She brushed past me, her shoulder deliberately knocking against mine.

The scent of lemons lingered.

I knew what she meant. Being passive and shy didn’t go unnoticed.

The stairwell cleared, and I would be late for class if I didn’t hurry.

By the time I arrived in the classroom, the bell had already rung, and I slumped into my seat as two more students entered, distracting the professor from my tardiness.

Mazen’s words slithered back. “She loves you.”

Bullshit.

Karma didn’t love. She devoured equations, arguments, and the fragile egos of men who thought they were smarter than her.

Yet here I was, watching the way her hijab caught the light, wondering.

Instead of paying attention, I spent most of the class thinking about Karma’s reaction and words. As much as she had been horrible to me, I would still miss seeing her if I changed majors.

With a sigh, I forced myself to listen to the teacher and absorb his words. Engineering was my destiny, and I knew I had to finish the courses.

Later that evening, I met Mazen at a coffee shop by the beach just as the sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky with mesmerizing hues

of orange, purple, and pink. I loved our city and its breathtaking evenings.

Mazen was unusually late as I sipped coffee, waiting for him to order our usual falafel, hummus, pickles, and tea.

Should I text him?

I turned my attention to the sunset, enjoying it while it was peaceful before Mazen's ruckus arrived. But I was also eager to hear his ideas on how to help Amina.

"Daydreaming again?"

Mazen's voice pulled me out of my reverie, and I motioned for him to sit.

"You haven't ordered?"

I shook my head.

"You'll never live on your own. You want someone to wipe your ass." Mazen chuckled.

If it were anyone else, I would've taken exception to his words. But he never teased if anyone was in earshot, and although I was not as forward, I'd dished out enough over the years.

He clapped and waved to draw the server's attention. Mazen placed our order when the young boy arrived at our table. It was a routine meal we enjoyed.

"I heard what happened on the stairs." Mazen turned his attention to me after the server left.

I burned with shame. I didn't think anyone had noticed the incident.

"You said you have treatment ideas for Amina," I said, desperately wanting to hear his thoughts and divert his attention from what had happened that morning.

"Don't change the subject. Spill."

Resigned, I said, "I'll tell you everything. But can we talk about my sister first?"

We never received a diagnosis for Amina's condition. Some doctors believed it was prenatal trauma, others thought it was genetic, and still others guessed it might have been environmental. No one had a

definitive answer, and we lacked the medical resources to determine her ailment.

Although there had been some progress over the years, Amina, now twenty-four, still needed around-the-clock care, including assistance with feeding. That was my mother's responsibility.

As much as I loved my sister, there were times in my teens when I wished she had died to free us all, including herself, from this painful life. Then guilt would wash over me, and I would regret my thoughts. I didn't truly mean it. I just hated to see Amina suffer.

Some days, I would leave for school and not return until late at night, to escape our home life, and Mazen never left my side.

With the bookbag slung over my shoulder, I wandered to the shore, where I did my homework, savoring the unburdened existence, at least for a while.

"What the hell does this mean?" Mazen pointed to a geometry problem as if written in a foreign language.

Patiently, I helped him solve it, explaining every step along the way.

"I don't get why you like this stuff." He huffed, closing his workbook and returning it to his bag.

Mazen loved poetry and literature that I couldn't connect with. I couldn't understand how anyone would spend hours reading and not do anything with the material beyond enjoying the words.

I shook my head and returned to my homework.

We sat in silence as we watched the sun dip into the horizon, casting long shadows on the sand.

It was getting dark, and I could no longer see the text. I stood, shaking the sand from my pants, put my books in the bag, and slung it over my shoulder.

Ignoring the hunger didn't make it disappear. My stomach grumbled, reminding me to eat.

"Hey." Mazen snapped his fingers close to my face, jolting me back to the present.

"Where did you go?" he asked.

"Never mind. So, what do you have for me?"

"All this time I was talking, and you were off in Lala land? Is that it?"

Embarrassed, I mumbled an apology.

"Anyway," —he pulled a paper from his front pants' pocket— "Here is a list of places you can contact."

I thanked him, accepted the paper, and read the organizations he found. "I'll start calling first thing in the morning."

The food arrived, and we dug in.

"Oh, no, you don't," Mazen said, snatching the bread from my hand. "First, you tell me what happened on the stairs!"

9 — Hope Beneath the Moonlight

"Hope still flies, even among death. I try to keep writing and learning because maybe I can help this city — even with my words." — Nadira Moshtaha.

Then…

Begrudgingly, I relayed the ordeal with Karma as Mazen's tears slid down his face, clutching his sides in hysterical laughter. I didn't find it funny.

When he finally worked his way out of his fit, he slapped his thighs and looked up, his eyes wild with amusement. Between gasps, he said, "She loves you."

How he came to that conclusion was beyond my understanding. I shook my head and stared at him, humiliated, feeling a flush creeping up my neck. "Nothing in her tone suggested that."

"Because she hates how much she wants you." Mazen grinned, wiping his eyes. "That's how Palestinian women flirt, with knives in their words."

I shoved him, but my chest tightened. *What if he's right*?

The thought was dangerous. Karma was a wildfire. She was brilliant and untouchable. And I was just a boy with a sister who couldn't walk, a father who couldn't read, and a home that wasn't really ours.

"Admit it," Mazen quipped. "You're head over heels, too."

He wasn't wrong on that score, but I would never say it aloud and make a fool of myself.

"Anyway, now you know. Can we finish our meal in peace?" I said it before, looking at my empty plate.

We left as the call to prayer echoed over the waves. The streets were unusually quiet. No kids kicking dented soda cans. No old men

arguing over backgammon. Just the distant thrum of drones, like flies circling a wound.

Silence had been our only companion until we reached Mazen's street, where the houses resembled ours, all in the process of being partially built or rebuilt to make our stay more permanent in a land that wasn't our original home. We were refugees from another part of Palestine, our ancestral land.

Mazen clapped my shoulder at his gate. "Call the agencies tomorrow. For Amina."

Then, a sound like the sky tearing open.

We froze.

A column of fire erupted two blocks north. The shockwave hit us a second later, rattling teeth and shaking the ground. Mazen's gate swung wildly on its hinges.

"Get down—"

We dove as debris rained: chunks of concrete, shards of glass, a child's sandal, still warm.

When the dust cleared, Mazen's face was gray. "That's… that's the UNRWA office."

The building where I'd planned to beg for Amina's cure was now a skeleton of twisted rebar.

When it quieted, we stood, shaken, staring at each other as if it were the last time we would be together. Afraid to breathe, we shook hands, and I turned to leave.

At the corner, I turned just in time to see him wave as he opened the metal gate to his courtyard.

My head buzzed with thoughts I wished weren't there.

Then, there was the thought of death. Will I see tomorrow to worry about how to help Amina, manage my studies, and feel the pounding of my heart as Karma crept in, almost freezing my legs.

I had two more streets to pass before reaching our home. I urged my feet to keep moving as I pushed aside the thoughts. There was nothing I could do in the middle of the road.

When I reached our gate, I paused with my hand over the latch. I adjusted my backpack strap and pushed open the metal barrier. Stillness greeted me. It was thick and stifling.

On light feet, I crept through Mother's herbs and vegetables planted in old oil cans and broken pottery. Overhead, sour green grapes dangled, not quite ready to tempt my taste buds.

"Come. Sit."

My father's voice startled me. I looked to my right, where he sat on a woven straw chair, a cup of tea on the table beside him, and an argeelah tip halfway to his lips. The apple tobacco from the water pipe drifted into my senses as Baba drew the tip to his lips, inhaled, and then let the smoke float toward the hanging vine.

I shuffled toward him and dropped my bag on a chair.

"What's eating you, son?"

Shaking my head, I sat in a chair next to him, stretching my legs out and leaning back.

Baba didn't repeat his question, and we sat in silence for a while.

While he waited for my response, Baba poured another cup of tea and handed it to me. I was used to his habits. His silence and the tea compelled my answer.

"Amina…"

"Don't you think we've tried everything already?" Baba reminded me that my parents would never neglect my sister's needs.

"I know. Of course, I do."

"But?" he challenged.

I extracted the list of agencies from my pocket and unfolded it.

"What's that?" My father took the paper from my hand, squinted, and scanned it in the meager light.

"Too dark to see." He handed it back. "What is it?"

His calloused hands rested on mine, and his gaze moved to the smoke he exhaled toward the moonbeams filtering through the leaves.

Baba was not literate; he barely read at a third-grade level, as he was forced out of school to help the family earn a living.

Handing him papers over the years while telling him what they contained, I acted as if I didn't know. Baba's eyes would scan the words,

and he would repeat what I said. It was a game. We both understood the rules.

My father was born in 1978, and my mother in 1982. He had two siblings, while Mama was an only child. She finished eighth grade before being forced to leave school to help her family. Baba wasn't so lucky. With so many mouths to feed, my grandfather pulled him out of school to teach him how to fish and support his family.

In 1986, Gaza continued to face significant restrictions on movement, economic activity, and political expression. During this period, the First Intifada was approaching, as frustration over occupation and living conditions was increasing.

Baba never went back to school, and if what you could see in his eyes told a story, it would be of regrets and missed chances. Still, he pushed me through school and now to finish college.

"Will that help?" He pointed to the crumbled paper in my fist.

No. But I said, "Maybe."

Because hope was the only currency we had left.

The previous night's unfinished conversation rattled my mind as I ate breakfast while Mother hovered nearby, fussing over me, ensuring I had enough to eat.

Amina was sleeping, and the muezzin had just finished his morning call to prayer.

Mama didn't bother to pray if no one was watching. Without expressing her thoughts, ignoring the ritual spoke volumes.

Baba left before I woke up. Part of me wanted him to stay home so we could talk about what we hadn't. But there was no point in wishing for things that couldn't happen.

I lifted my gaze to my mother as I dipped bread in olive oil.

She lifted her brows, asking me what was on my mind with just the simple gesture I learned to read as a child.

I pulled the bread out of the oil, dipped it in za'atar, and then put it in my mouth, chewing as I reached for the backpack by my feet.

While Mother watched, I took out the paper and smoothed it on the table beside my plate. Her questioning eyes tracked my move and landed on the words.

Humanity & Inclusion (HI)

United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)

World Health Organization (WHO)

Palestine Children's Relief Fund (PCRF)

"What's this?" she asked.

"I'm calling them today to see if we can get a cure for Amina."

My mother ruffled my hair, just as she did when I was a child, drawing a stick figure and coloring the sky with a black crayon.

Slowly, she lowered herself into my father's chair to my right, at the head of the table.

"Emad," she said, adjusting her scarf. "There is no cure for Amina. Don't you think we've tried?"

"But-but…" I stuttered, knowing it had been years since they tried, and maybe, just maybe, there was a treatment for her now.

Mama shook her head, and I could tell she was fighting back the tears.

Her hand gently landed on mine. "There is no cure for Amina," she repeated. "Besides, she is too old. Most organizations help the young ones if they have the funding."

Somewhere deep inside, I knew the truth before I opened my mouth… before I considered changing majors. But as my father's eyes taught me, we never gave up hope.

10 — Echoes of the Sky and My Heart

"Our professors were kind. They would reach out when I disappeared due to internet outages. That kept me going. We Palestinians have an unbreakable will." — Fatima Skaik.

Now…

The ground trembled as another explosion shattered the early morning silence. Dust and debris coated the tents in a gray fog.

Noor from a nearby tent pulled her younger brother, Sami, closer, shielding him against her crumbling life.

"Stay close, stay close," she cried as he wriggled from her grasp.

I knew why he fought her. At six years old, he still believed the world had corners to explore. Noor knew better. Her father had vanished three days ago chasing a rumor of flour.

Another blast. Closer this time.

Another building had collapsed in the distance, swallowing entire families within its walls. The scent of smoke clung to the air, thick and suffocating.

She looked at me pleadingly.

In the overcrowded shelters, food was rationed, water was scarce, and hope flickered like a dying candle.

Then, another blast.

Sami froze, his small body pressed to Noor's side. The children who'd been playing moments ago now huddled under makeshift awnings, their games forgotten.

From the sky, echoes of war rained, and yet, somehow, against all odds, we refused to surrender to the darkness.

I let out an exasperated sigh and ducked into the tent to kiss my mother's hand. There was no way to know if this would be the last time,

and I wanted to carry her blessings into the next life if it was my turn to go.

Another daunting day awaited me. Heat like a furnace scorched my face and bare arms as I stood in the sun, stirring and dishing, stirring and dishing until there was nothing left but rice clinging to the scorched bottom.

I watched two children, no older than six, scraping the pot with their bare hands. One shoved a fistful in his mouth, relishing the charred remains as if they were a gourmet meal. The other busied himself with filling a plate.

Crying wouldn't help. I wanted to pull my hair and rip my skin. The frustration and anger ran that deep. I wanted to extract them, exorcise myself from this misery they called life.

The sun was a branding iron. I stirred the pot, my arms aching. Scrape. Scoop. Serve.

Two boys, Sami and another, dug charred rice from the bottom with bare fingers. One shoved a fistful into his mouth, his cheeks bulging like a starving squirrel's. The other filled a dented plate with shaking hands.

This is what we've become.

My ration bag weighed nothing. A handful of rice. Half an onion I would share at home. Not the house my father built, but the flimsy canvas that barely protected us from the elements, especially during the heat of summer, when there was no relief.

I trudged home, a kilometer away, through piles of garbage, buzzing with flies, and the acrid stench of open sewers.

A few feet before reaching our tent, I stopped abruptly, staring at a figure retreating to my left. A woman walked ahead, her gait familiar despite the sunken shoulders.

It had to be a mirage, a delirium caused by hunger and heat.

No. It can't be.

Before I could second-guess myself, I ran toward the woman. Our culture didn't allow direct contact between genders, but I had to see for myself and confirm my mind hadn't deserted me.

I slowed to a shuffle as I got closer. *Please turn*, I thought, though I would never say the words aloud.

Another woman approached and stepped in front of the one I was chasing, briefly gesturing and wiping her face with the edge of her mandeel, the scarf that had wiped away many tears, I was sure.

Patiently, I waited, hoping the older woman would leave. I moved when their eyes landed on me, questioning my presence at their tents.

At the end of the row, I rubbed my chin, pretending to have forgotten something, then turned to walk back. The women still stood and talked. I stared at the familiar features, now with sunken cheeks and haunted eyes that were no different from the rest of us.

When we made eye contact, I mouthed, "Karma?"

Gone was the arrogant and smug expression, replaced with something I was all too familiar with: despair.

Her gaze locked onto mine. Then, she shook her head and returned her attention to the woman before her as if awakening from a trance.

Dare I hope she has tapped into her humanity, and we stand a chance?

A spark of hope ignited, and before I changed my mind, I approached the women, breaking all traditions and norms.

"Can I…" I cleared my throat and started over. "Can I speak with you for a moment, please?" I said with a straightened spine.

Karma nodded once and excused herself.

I clasped my hands behind my back, steadying myself, to show I wouldn't cross cultural boundaries. No one seemed to notice, or maybe they no longer cared. Many women and men exchanged information, helped with whatever needed to be done, and cooperated in ways that weren't possible before this recent catastrophe.

I nodded toward the sea, and we kept a few feet between us as we walked in silence.

When we were out of earshot, I asked, "How are you?"

It was more of a rhetorical question; we were all the same: hungry, desperate, grieving.

I waited for a snarky reply, but it never came. Instead, her eyes welled with tears as she looked at the horizon, gently shaking her head.

I wanted to wipe the glittering tear sliding down her cheek, but I kept my hands behind my back.

No, I didn't enjoy abuse or humiliation. What I missed at that moment was our normal: the normal that let Karma be herself. I missed our usual life, where I complained about not having what others had around the world —mundane things like shirts, jeans, or maybe a new cell phone that had to be smuggled in and cost a fortune.

"Your parents?" I asked.

She shook her head again, and another tear escaped, followed by many more, until her shoulders vibrated with pent-up grief, and her breath hitched.

Minutes later, a tear cut through the grime on her cheek. She wiped her face, straightened her frame, and turned to face me. Karma didn't need to tell me her family had been wiped out.

"Yours?" she asked.

"My dad…" My throat constricted against the rest of the sentence, refusing to let the words out. Though Baba was only missing, it was a technicality that meant nothing here.

With nothing more to say, we stood in silence, looking out at the water.

Once more, Karma turned to me. "Mazen? Your sidekick?" She almost let out a chuckle of derision.

There it was, the fiery Karma beneath the despair.

I pointed behind me. "He's here somewhere. I saw him the other day."

"I'd better get back," she said with a sigh. "My cousin will start looking for me."

Karma turned to leave. I watched her defeated figure weave between the rows, and I followed at a distance. I had to find out where she was staying. I couldn't let her go.

11 — Shadows of Survival

"Some locked their doors, not knowing history would steal the hinges." — Archive of Displaced Villages (1948)

Now…

The scream didn't just shatter the silence; it severed whatever fragile thread still connected me to sanity. My body moved before my mind caught up, bare feet slapping against cold dirt as I burst from the tent.

I couldn't tell where the cries came from, so I looked around to follow those heading to investigate, but found none.

The wailing continued, and this time, I followed the sound to a spot about three rows over. Noor's eldest brother peeked out of his tent, his questioning eyes landing on me. I lifted one shoulder and let it fall, too exhausted to raise both.

"Emad," my mother's almost whisper reached me. "What's going on? Who's crying? Why?"

Even if I found the answers, what could I do? What could any of us do?

Sickness, injuries, and death were our companions in every moment of every day.

"Go back to sleep, Yamma. It's the middle of the night."

"Who can sleep, my son? How can anyone shut their eyes? Look at what we've become." She flapped her hands, and they landed on her chest with several soft thwacks.

My mother never complained, even in the past sixteen months, when death would have been welcomed. Hearing her pleas tore my heart.

I ducked under the flap, sat beside sleeping Amina, and for once envied her oblivion. Amina no longer had her window, yet she never complained.

"God will replace, my son."

Mother's words sent a shiver down my spine. *Since when has she become religious*?

"Yamma?" I caught her trembling hands mid-air. "Since when do you pray?"

Her laugh sounded like a ration tin being crushed. "Since God became the only doctor still making house calls."

"I saw Mazen two days ago."

Mother laid her hand on mine. "His family?"

"I don't know."

She nodded. "Get some sleep."

I lay on the mat and stared at the palm tree shadows dancing on the canvas above me.

3:17 AM. The bombs took shifts in precise 22-minute intervals. Just long enough for the baby in Tent 12 to stop crying. Just short enough to prevent real sleep. My watch (a graduation gift from Baba) still kept time in a world that had none left.

My mother whispered something that could have been a prayer with each distant explosion; our harsh nightly lullaby.

I sat up, clutching my knees to my chest, as my heart pounded in rhythm with the chaos outside. Fear coiled in my empty stomach, cold and sharp, but there was no room for panic, only the desperate attempt to hold onto something steady when the world shook around me.

Memories rushed through my mind of my father, my home, and the quiet moments before everything changed. *Will the sun rise tomorrow on something other than rubble*? *Will I hear laughter again, not sirens*?

But amid the fear, defiance was born in a quiet strength that refused to be extinguished. I took a slow breath, grounding myself in the filtered light.

Outside, everything was still except for the wailing and the calls to a god who was absent. It was a short break from the onslaught. They bombed us at night, depriving us of much-needed sleep.

My stomach grumbled, and Mother handed me a dried piece of bread. "I saved this for you, my son."

If I ate it, she and Amina wouldn't have anything until I returned from my shift in the 'kitchen.' I waved it off, and my mother wrapped it in a plastic bag and set it aside.

How far I had sunk from an engineering student with a future to stirring pots and ladling food into broken dishes.

I curled on my side and willed the next few hours to be quiet. Maybe I could grab fleeting sleep.

But my mind refused to obey.

Karma's face haunted me worse than the corpses. At least the dead had the decency to stay buried. She kept resurfacing in the way Noor tied her scarf, in the determined set of Mazen's jaw when he talked about Ghassan Kanafani, all the ghosts of a future that had flatlined.

Was I infatuated with her, grasping threads of what was left of normalcy, or was it something more?

Guilt consumed me. There was no room for Karma in my thoughts… There shouldn't be. Those school days were over. A distant memory, I most likely would forget if I didn't die first.

Then, there was Mazen. I promised myself I would call him in the morning after finding a spot to charge my phone and catch a stray signal.

I saw several signals hovering near a destroyed building. They had rigged a generator that ran on cooking oil, which was soon to be scarce, and somehow managed to receive a satellite signal.

Somewhere at the edge of the camp, some Palestinians had begun recycling plastic waste to create fuel due to severe shortages. They collected plastic from debris, cut it into smaller pieces, and burned it in makeshift ovens to extract gasoline and fuel. We appreciated their efforts, but the process posed serious environmental and health risks due to toxic fumes. Maybe it would keep the generators running.

Before I knew it, morning had crept through the thin canvas. Reluctantly, I readied myself to face another day.

My mother was snoring softly, and Amina was still asleep. I stood and stretched. There was no more toothpaste left to brush my teeth. Maybe I could borrow soap from someone who hadn't run out yet.

'We are Palestinians, my son. We don't give up.' My father's words pushed me forward.

Another day, another loaf of bread and a bowl of stew, I took home to our tent, our temporary permanent home.

I knew our house in Al Shati wouldn't have lasted. The cinder block walls my father carefully built became his tomb, but we didn't linger to find out. I had to move my mother and sister to safety, to the "safe zone," as the Zionists called it. But there was no real safety. They bombed us there, too.

If I could ensure my mother's and Amina's well-being, I would return to look for my father and bury him properly. Maybe I could unearth memories to carry with me.

Everyone in the Beach refugee camp was already refugees from Lod, Haifa, and other places where Zionist ethnic cleansing took place in 1948. They erased over 500 villages from existence after they chased Palestinians off their lands, including my father's family home.

I should've gone when they called a ceasefire. We believed it to be true, but now I knew it was a small window before they resumed killing and starving us.

The key. That damned rusted skeleton key to a house that no longer existed except in my father's stories. The one he'd gone back for when he should've fled with us. Seventy-five years after Zionist gangs stole our home in Lod, we were still dying for symbols.

But I had to find it.

The deed to my great-grandfather's house would be long gone, but the key had to be there.

Part of me was angry at my dad for abandoning us, for making that piece of rusted metal more important than his life, but I understood. Now, more than ever, living in a borrowed shelter, I understood how important that key was.

My grandparents… my great-grandparents.

12 — Yamma's Keys

"The Palestinian child who carries a key instead of a toy knows that exile is temporary, even if it lasts a lifetime."
— Ghassan Kanafani (Men in the Sun)

Then…

When I was small, I asked my father where my grandparents were. I knew my mother's side. They came once to visit from Jordan. They, too, were refugees living on foreign soil.

"At least we still live on part of our homeland," my father once said.

My father relayed a childhood story as I raptly sat and listened…

Younes Khaddouri, 1977-1988

Often, two skeleton keys to her stolen home in Haifa rattled in my grandmother's apron pocket as she stirred the stew, slowly simmering in an ancient pot her mother and grandmother had used. From where I sat cross-legged on the cold tile floor, I watched "Yamma," her weathered, shaky hands gripping the spoon as she muttered to herself.

"Soon, my child. Soon, we'll return to our home. Inshallah—God willing."

In the afternoon, the teenage cousins and my almost eight-year-old brother, Omar, followed me through the kitchen, absentmindedly opening cabinets as they looked for something to eat. Their attention was on the magazine in Omar's hand, connecting them to a world they'd never seen; a world beyond the stone walls of their refugee camp home.

From my spot, I watched the faces hovering over me as my cousins and brother grabbed a piece of bread, cheese, tomato, and cucumber. Crunching and flipping through the pages, they passed by our grandmother and gave her a peck on the cheek, then continued on their way. Such a routine gesture done in oblivion.

It didn't escape Yamma. With every peck, she shook her head and muttered, "Soon, our Nakbe will end. Soon, we'll go home. Inshallah."

My five-year-old mind was more fascinated by the jangle in her pocket than her words. Each time I reached out to touch them, she swatted my hand away and clutched her chest with gnarled hands, repeating her mantra.

I returned to my cross-legged position and grabbed my toys: a raggedy ball that had lost its form, a car missing a wheel, and a stub of a pencil with a strip of paper left over from my school day.

Bored, I collected my treasures and returned them to their hiding spot behind a floor cushion, then shuffled my bare feet, searching for my brother and cousins to play with. No one had time for me. Their noses were buried in the magazine while my grandmother's keys jingled in her pocket as she silently stirred the stew.

"Yamma," I called from the sitting room.

"Yamma," I called again when she didn't answer the first time.

Before I called the third time, I heard the jangle of the two skeleton keys in her pocket. She was slowly making her way to the kitchen door, leaning on walls and counters as she carried her tired body across the floor.

I rose from the crouched position in front of the end table, clutching a picture of a pretty lady to my chest. The photo sat in the center of a side table, surrounded by family members.

"What is it?" she asked, breathless from the effort.

"Who is she?" I asked, turning the photo to face Yamma.

A shake of her head and, "Put it back. I don't want you breaking the glass," was the standard response to my question, yet again.

She turned in the doorway, back to stirring her stew.

* * *

1988: 10 years old

"Who is she?" I asked for the hundredth time, polishing the frame with my sleeve.

Yamma snatched it from me. "Be grateful for the roof over your head, Younes." She shoved the photo behind the breadbox. "These questions won't fill your stomach."

My cousin Sami smirked from the doorway. "He doesn't know?"

"Know what?"

Yamma threw her slipper at Sami. "Out! Both of you!"

My father and Yamma never shared a bedroom, which made my young mind curious, but I never questioned it. I wouldn't have been allowed to.

My father also called her "Yamma," which I didn't think much of when I was young. It wasn't uncommon for the title to be given to women who were mothers, grandmothers, and sometimes even to parents of friends and distant cousins. Yet, there was always that niggling feeling when I looked at her and wondered, not daring to ask my question aloud.

* * *

On a cloudless night when I was nearly sixteen, my sister boiled tea with a sprig of mint, sweetened it just as my father liked, and I carried it to the courtyard on a tray.

I stopped in the doorway, steeling myself to ask him the burning questions. "Who's the woman in the picture? Who's Yamma?"

Even without being told, I knew in my heart of hearts Yamma wasn't my mother.

My father shifted in his cane-back chair as he lifted his gaze to search for the stars peeking through the jasmine trellis. The flowers' scent was intense, and the petals on the ground looked like snow in winter. Tears streamed down his cheek, shining in the moon's light.

I froze in place. I had never seen my father cry, not even when my thirteen-year-old cousin, his only nephew, was shot by the Israeli Occupation Army as he left school. A routine message was sent to the parents to ensure resistance to the occupation didn't happen. The soldiers were told to teach us a lesson: never resist.

I stared at the back of my father's head, now graying with age. *What's making him cry*?

I retreated a few steps and, with a clamor, banged the metal kitchen door open. It slammed into the stone wall, giving my father time to compose himself before I approached.

Setting the tray on a small plastic table beside him, I waited for him to say, "*Shukran habiby*—Thank you, my love," dismissing me back to where I came from.

He didn't. Instead, he leaned and dragged a chair close to him and motioned for me to sit.

"What's on your mind, my son?" he asked.

"Nothing," I replied.

"The tea is cold, and the door you banged gives me a headache. Now, tell me, what's on your mind?"

I wanted to ask him why he was crying, but that would have humiliated him. So, I took a deep breath and fidgeted with the hem of my shirt, unraveling a loose thread.

I asked, my head bowed, eyes staring at my lap, "Where is my mother? I know Yamma is not my real mother."

My father scanned the heavens one more time, pointing at a star in the distance. "She's up there with the angels."

When he didn't say more, and the need to know burned a hole in my soul, I asked, "What happened to her? When did she die?"

He never met my eyes and kept staring at the sky. "In 1973, when you were a year old, your brother, three, your mother, and I loaded down with grocery bags, waited for the bus to arrive near Hebron. We left you and your brother with Yamma." Eyes glistening, my father took a shuddering breath and stared at the petals covering the ground. "Jewish settlers attacked Palestinian villages. 'Break their bones' was their policy, and Israeli forces under Yitzhak Rabin ordered harsh suppression of protests, leading to deaths."

I held my breath and kept my tongue in check. I was so close to uncovering the truth and didn't want to make a sound out of fear that it would break the spell and bring my father back to the courtyard. I was certain he would stop talking.

I waited what felt like an eternity.

He picked up his now-cold tea and took a sip, not seeming to notice its temperature. You see, he refused to drink tea unless it was scalding hot.

The small tea glass clanged against the metal tray as he absentmindedly set it down.

My father shifted again in his seat, and without looking at me, he continued while wringing his hands as if trying to rid himself of whatever was on them.

"The bus arrived, and we gathered the bags we had set on the ground earlier, relieving our aching hands. Your mother bent and picked up two. One slipped, and oranges skidded in the streets. I remember telling her not to worry about them. A poor man can eat today. When I bent down to pick up the remaining bags, the sudden blast knocked me off my feet; I landed on top of others in the street. Disoriented from the explosion, I looked around for your mother.

"I finally struggled to my feet and ran to the curb where she was. Bodies, blood, and parts of bodies were strewn everywhere. I pushed and shoved my way and found her. People were shouting, some in agony, some in despair. Your mother lay. Still, her head was covered with blood.

In the distance, sirens wailed, and I didn't know whether they were warning sounds or the call of an ambulance. Then, I heard someone say help was on the way.

"I sat on the ground and cradled Mariam in my arms, willing her to stay alive until help arrived."

A sob, or perhaps a sigh, escaped, and my father quickly straightened his frame, collecting his pride and sanity. With his thumb, he pointed behind him and said, "The picture you asked about is your mother, Mariam. Yamma is your grandmother, my mother."

The words gushed from my father like blood from my mother's open wounds. Draining what was left of his soul.

* * *

The jangle of the keys in my grandmother's pocket brought us to the present.

There was no more mention of my mother, but plenty about the home of the orange groves and olive trees they left behind.

Recollections of Yamma when she was forced out of her home by a stranger wielding a gun, claiming the house of my ancestors was given to him by the will of his god. I never understood how a god could make us homeless and give our beloved home and land to a stranger.

The years raced by, and now, with a family and a home of my own, I flipped through the memories of our Diaspora, longing to touch the soil of my ancestors long after Yamma was laid to rest in a foreign land, and my father beside her.

Another generation. Another vow to return home as I passed by the two keys to Palestine hanging by the front door. “Soon, my child. Soon, we will return to our home. Inshallah” echoed through the walls of my soul.

13 — The Weight of Leaving

"Exile is not a place… exile is time." — Ghassan Kanafani

Now…

Once again, I vowed to return to our home. I would rebuild it as my father's legacy, even if it weren't on his ancestors' soil. I would retrieve the key, with regret gnawing at me for not asking my father what happened to the second key that rattled in Yamma's pocket.

If I were to make it north, I would need to find someone to look after my mother and sister. While it broke my heart to let go of reconnecting with Karma, something within my soul urged me to travel, despite the risks I might be taking.

Before second-guessing myself, I went to the "Signal," the spot where everyone gathered to charge their phones and make calls. I pushed my way into the line that others had already formed.

The phone screen flickered: 12% battery, 2 bars. Enough to send one message.

Emad: meet me at the kitchen. Going north tomorrow.

I stared at the unsent text, thumb hovering. Mazen's phone could be dead. Or he could be. The last explosion near the water tanks had been too close—

SEND.

No reply. Just the hollow whoosh of another drone overhead.

Karma, I thought, my heart fluttering with regret.

I should've asked for her number when she still wore perfume instead of ash, and when her hands held books instead of ration cards.

Now? We were all ghosts waiting to be buried.

Her family was in a much stronger financial position than mine, which would have made her out of my league for romance or even friendship, but here, we were all the same. No bank account or past achievements separated us. We were all hungry, exhausted, and scraping the bottom of the barrel for any sign of sanity.

I knew where she was. *Do I dare approach her*? I thought while making my way to the relief kitchen.

I hadn't seen Mazen all day and couldn't risk leaving without ensuring Mother's and Amina's safety. Perhaps I could ask someone from the kitchen to bring food, but I quickly dismissed the idea—they would ask too many questions.

Since I couldn't bring myself to leave the next morning after dropping off the bread and stew at our tent, I went to look for my long-time friend. It would be like a "needle in a garbage dump," as the Arabic saying goes.

My mother had insisted I eat. I was too weak to argue, so I took half a pita and a tomato and prepared to leave.

"Where are you going, my son?" Mother called after me.

"I won't be long," I responded.

"Emad?"

I turned to look at my mother. Something in her voice made my insides run cold.

Slowly, I crouched before her. "What is it?"

"Amina…"

My eyes darted to my sister, the giggle and the spark in her eyes long gone. She sat on the floor cushions, propped up by blankets and pillows. Her chair was now a makeshift shelf since she could no longer use it. It was impossible to roll the wheels on shifting sand.

"Mother?"

She picked up the scarf's edge and covered her mouth as if to trap the words inside.

"Is something wrong with her?" I asked, concerned about eating the lining of my empty stomach.

"We don't have diapers or cloths. I don't know what to do."

This surprised me. I never paid attention to the details of my sister's care, maybe because my mother had been resourceful or perhaps because I'd been too selfish to pay attention.

It wasn't a topic we ever discussed, and now I felt too awkward to ask questions.

"What… what…" I fumbled to form words. I wanted to ask her what I was supposed to do.

"Can you go by the clinic?"

I nodded, unsure how a man like myself was supposed to ask for personal items. "What do I tell them?"

Mother gave me instructions.

When I hesitated, she said, "If your father, the great man, didn't blink an eye when he got our supplies, you can at least be half of him."

Humbled by her words, I told her I would do that first thing in the morning before I went to the kitchen.

The clinic, as they called it, was a lean-to similar to the kitchen where I worked. How they treated patients with such limited medical supplies was beyond me. There were no antibiotics, and those needing dialysis slowly died, their bodies poisoning them. Surgeries were performed by cell phone light and limb amputations without anesthesia, even on babies as young as ten months old. How was I supposed to ask for diapers for a grown woman?

"Diapers?" The nurse, a teenage girl, blinked at me. "For who?"

Heat crawled up my neck. "My sister. She's—"

"Twenty-four? We save ours for babies." She jerked her chin toward the back.

A mother rocked a listless infant, its diaper a rag tied with large knots.

"Please," I begged. "Just enough for two days."

She hesitated. Then said, "Wait here."

When she returned, the bundle in her arms smelled of bleach and desperation. "Don't tell anyone."

The distant explosions no longer cowed me as I had resigned myself to my fate. If a bomb didn't kill me, starvation would. Yes, I flinched, but I no longer stopped to take cover. How senseless that would be to seek shelter in a flimsy tent.

There was chatter about a brief two-month pause in Israel's genocidal aggression on Gaza. People largely did two things: they went back to see what had happened to their homes, and they tried to find their missing loved ones. I wanted to do both.

I roamed the camp, mustering the courage to speak with Karma. Since I couldn't find Mazen, I would use the excuse that I needed a female's help with my mother and sister.

Armed with that notion, I entered the row where Karma sheltered.

How to approach her was another dilemma; most of the kids were already with their families.

I had to do something before night fell.

Summoning my resolve, I stood before her tent and cleared my throat, announcing my presence.

"Who's there?" a voice asked.

I quickly said, "I'm Emad. Can I speak with Karma, please?"

Karma's cousin blocked the tent flap like a sentry. "Why should we help you?"

"What do you want with her?" the woman demanded.

"I'm going north to look for my father." I hesitated. This was a partial truth. "My mother… sister…"

She tilted her head, expecting more.

"Because he's going to die." Karma emerged, and her scarf had slipped to her shoulders, interrupting her cousin. "Aren't you, Emad?"

I swallowed hard at her truth.

"The IDF's shooting anyone north of Wadi Gaza," she continued. "Snipers on the Netzarim corridor. No ambulances reach the bodies."

I gripped the diapers tighter. "I have to try. For the key. For—"

"For what?" she interrupted with a razor-sharp laugh. "A rusted souvenir?"

"For proof!" The words tore out of me. "That we had homes. That we existed before they turned us into rats in a tent city!"

Her cousin closed the flap, and Karma and I stood in silence for a beat.

"I'm…I'm heading home tomorrow…"

"And?"

I pointed to the shore. "Can I ask for a favor? Can you look after them?" I asked.

Silence shrouded us.

Then Karma said in a low voice, "Two days!"

14 — Hidden Scars

"We have on this earth what makes life worth living: the scent of bread at dawn, a woman's defiance of a tyrant, the love stories of a people under siege, and the persistence of memory in the face of erasure." — Mahmoud Darwish

Now…

We sat in the damp sand a few feet apart.

"You shouldn't have come looking for me," Karma said. "People will talk."

I shook my head. Those silly traditions, even when facing death.

She must have read my mind because she said, "I know. But that's our culture."

The sea breeze blew as the sun started its descent into the horizon. Karma shivered, and I would've given her my only jacket if I had wanted to risk her bolting at such a bold move.

The wind tugged at Karma's scarf, revealing a keloid ridge that crawled up her neck like a vine strangling a tree. She jerked the fabric back.

"Don't." My hand hovered near hers. "It's just us."

She stiffened. "Us and every sniper on that ridge."

A drone's buzz punctuated her words.

We sat in loaded silence, the sea licking at our feet. The ceasefire wouldn't last. They never did.

"Tell me about your family," I said.

Karma plucked a chipped, uneven shell from the sand. "You want the scar story."

"I want your story."

Her fingers traced the ridge under her scarf. The waves filled the silence.

She tightened her scarf around her face, and in the faint light, I saw what looked like a scar when the wind blew her cover. Karma's actions seemed more aimed at hiding it than staying warm.

I changed the subject to what I came for. "Can you help me?"

"You can't find anyone else?" She hesitated. "How about Mazen?"

"He hadn't responded to my text, and I don't know where he is. I must leave tomorrow while we have a ceasefire."

"Why?"

I explained my need to find my dad's body, bury him properly, and see what was left of our house. Maybe I could take my mother and Amina home. "I'll check on your house if you want."

Karma shook her head. "There is nothing left."

I nodded.

She reluctantly agreed to look after my mother and Amina.

In the gifted rare stillness, we sat, each lost in our thoughts as the waves gently lapped the shore.

"I'd better get back," Karma said.

"Stay a while," I pleaded. "It's still not dark."

She surprised me by staying seated, with her legs stretched out and her fingers clasped tightly in her lap.

I turned to her, curious. "Tell me about your family."

Karma relayed how her father grew up in a refugee house that was no different from ours, how he studied hard, earned a steady income as a successful businessman, and how he built the house when she was a teenager. I recalled passing by it and gawking at it in awe.

Emboldened by having something in common, I blurted, "Tell me about…" I pointed to my neck, taking a chance that Karma wouldn't run and I would never see her again.

Karma's eyes flitted to the horizon, and she told her story in hushed tones as if speaking to herself.

I only interrupted a handful of times, but otherwise, I listened, mesmerized.

2009

Five-year-old Karma stood on tiptoes, nose wrinkling at the sour tang of kerosene. The pot of garbanzo beans bubbled and hissed.

"Yamma makes it look easy," she muttered, climbing onto the counter.

Her knee knocked the burner.

Time split:

The hiss of boiling liquid hitting skin.

The scream that brought her mother running.

The smell of burnt chickpeas and melting flesh.

In the clinic, the doctor's gloves were flecked with rust. "We'll pack it with ointment."

With limited resources to handle burn victims, the local hospital did its best to mitigate the damage and stop potential infection.

The agonizing days dragged on as her burn slowly healed, but not without several complications, especially because the neck had thin, sensitive skin and was a high-mobility area.

The delayed healing led to hypertrophic scars—raised, red scars—and then developed into keloids—excessive scar tissue that extends beyond the burn area. The outcome was contractures—tightened skin that restricted neck movement.

At that time, Karma's parents didn't have the means to seek medical treatment for their daughter abroad, and over the years, her condition worsened. Karma had some nerve and muscle damage, causing long-term dysfunction. By the time she turned ten, it was nearly impossible for her to move her neck. Instead, her head was frozen in a sideways tilt, making it difficult to navigate the already challenging life they faced in a refugee camp.

Her father was in his last year at the university, and her mother stayed home to care for Karma's siblings. Their resources were limited because her father could only work evenings and days off from studying, so further medical care was out of the question.

Karma's voice was flat. "Adel sold his university textbooks to bribe the hospital director for antibiotics."

I knew this story. Everyone did. The brilliant girl who got the American surgery. The family that sacrificed everything. What I didn't know was her name.

"You never told me how it felt," I said.

She turned slowly, her scar pulling her chin sideways. "Like dying. They inserted bags under my skin in several places that had to be filled with saline solution to stretch the skin… Then more surgeries to repair."

Karma shook her head, staring at the horizon.

The sun dipped lower. Somewhere, a child laughed with a sound so foreign we both startled.

2014

When she turned ten, a charitable group from the US visited the camp's hospital, offering care for those who couldn't afford it. What Karma needed was extensive reconstructive surgery, which was something the team of doctors couldn't perform with their limited supplies.

Karma's seventeen-year-old brother, Adel, approached the team's social worker, who referred him to the mission organizer. Adel didn't tell his parents what he had done. He later told Karma he had little hope she would be considered. Weeks passed, and Adel hadn't heard anything. By then, he believed there was no hope for his sister; she would forever be 'deformed,' and despite her brilliant mind, there was no future for her.

One evening, while they sat on the floor for their evening meal, someone knocked, which was unusual for that time of day.

Karma jumped up to answer it, her younger sister rushing to the door ahead of her. When she opened it, she saw a Palestinian woman and a foreign man.

"Is Um Adel home?" the woman asked in Arabic.

Karma nodded and yelled, "Yamma, someone here to see you." Then nudged her sister. "Go get her!"

When her mother approached the door, wiping her hands on a towel, the lady stepped forward.

"Um Adel, I am Hind, and this is Charlie from Hands of Hope for Palestine."

"Welcome, welcome," Karma's mother said, ushering her inside.

She turned to her youngest. "Get your father."

The foreigners sat cross-legged on her mother's good rug, their shoes leaving muddy tracks.

"Karma, get tea and biscuits," Karma's mother instructed.

When her father entered, introductions were made, and he took a seat opposite the guests.

"What can I do for you?" her father asked.

Hind explained the purpose of their visit, apologizing for interrupting their evening meal. When she was finished, Charlie spoke in English, and Hind translated her words.

"We are impressed by Adel's determination to help his sister."

Karma was shocked as she listened to the conversation and discovered Adel wanted to help her and find a way to repair the burn damage.

By the end of the visit, Hind and Charlie offered to fly Karma to the US for surgery. The organization would arrange and cover all her medical, travel, and housing expenses. The catch? She would have to travel without her mother or any other family member. Hind would personally accompany her and another girl from the West Bank who had been shot in her thigh, and, with poor medical care, one leg was now shorter than the other.

"They want to take me to California?" Karma's voice was small. "Where is that?"

Her father's prayer beads clicked. "A place with palm trees and Jews who pity Arabs."

Adel, with ink-stained hands from night shifts at the print shop, slammed his fist on the table. "Let them fix her!"

Her mother's tears rolled down her cheek. "What if they keep her? What if—"

"What if she stays?" Adel yelled. "A crippled spinster?"

The word hung in the air.

The guests left, giving the family time to consider the offer and stating that they would need an answer within the week.

Karma dug her fingers into the sand. “I hated Adel for years. Now he’s under twenty tons of rubble near Shifa Hospital.”

I reached for her hand. She allowed it for only three seconds before pulling away.

“You’ll die going north,” she repeated.

“Then help me live. Let me not worry about my mother and sister.”

We watched the waves erase our footprints as darkness fell.

15 — Between Duty and Desperation

"I am from there. I am from here. I am not there, and I am not here." — Mahmoud Darwish.

Now…

The sun had set, casting long shadows over the makeshift camp, but Karma made no move to leave.

The distant echo of artillery, another night of uneasy ceasefire, thrummed in the air.

"Anyway," she said, tracing circles in the sand with her finger, "After many discussions, my parents had no choice but to let me travel to America. Even though I was a young girl traveling with virtual strangers."

I was flabbergasted. It was unheard of for girls to travel alone, and Amina's face flashed in my mind. Would my parents have ever allowed it?

"If it meant healing," I murmured, more to myself than to Karma, "I would've been the first to send Amina away."

Karma's gaze sharpened. "You weren't listening."

Heat rushed to my face. "Sorry. My sister—"

"I heard about Amina."

The words struck like a blow. Amina's condition wasn't a secret, but Karma and I didn't move in the same circles. We weren't neighbors. We didn't share friends.

She must have seen the question in my eyes. "You think I don't pay attention?" A bitter smile touched her lips. "I'm not as heartless as you assume."

I swallowed hard, the taste of shame sour on my tongue.

She stood, shaking the sand from her clothes. “My year in the U.S. wasn’t bad. The host family treated me well.” She paused. “But no one tells you how lonely healing can be.”

I stood. I wanted to ask more about the flights, the treatments, the scar she still carried, but the night was heavy with unspoken fears. If I survived the journey north, maybe there’d be time.

“It’s late,” she said finally. “It is very late. I’ll take care of your mother and sister if you must go north.”

When I returned to the tent, my mother and sister were asleep. But my dreams were a storm of Karma’s face blurred with memories of home, of my father’s laughter before the war, before the October bombings turned our streets into graveyards.

I woke in a sweat just as my mother shook my shoulder.

“The kitchen,” she reminded me of my obligation that would help quieten the rumbling in our stomachs.

I bolted upright, not for food, but because dawn was creeping in. If I didn’t leave now, the drones would spot me in the open.

“What’s wrong?” Mother asked. She could always read me and knew my every mood, and sometimes I wondered if she read my mind too.

I hesitated. “I need to go north. To bury Baba.”

Her face tightened. “They’re still fighting near the border. The news says—”

“I know what the news says.”

Ceasefire. Temporary. Fragile. We both knew the truth.

“What’s eating you?” Mother asked.

Grabbing a battered kettle, I added water from a jug and loose tea leaves, then headed to the nearest open fire, two tents away. I didn’t need to ask if I could boil water. A ten-year-old moved their pan and pointed to the open spot to place my pot.

A few minutes later, I went back to our tent, poured two glasses, and gave one to my mother. Her furrowed brow told me I’d better sit down and tell her what I was doing.

Once I finished, Mother asked, “How do you know Karma?”

“From school. From university.”

“A long time ago, I heard of a girl… named Karma…” My mother’s eyes drifted to Amina. She didn’t need to finish her thought.

I nodded, affirming her unspoken words.

“Yamma. Would you have let Amina go?”

I waited for her to mull the question and carefully watched her eyes as they landed on me.

“Those days are gone with the wind,” my mother said, using a Palestinian expression. “No need to look back. We lost much.”

“I’m going home, Yamma,” I said.

Although I had told her why Karma would be looking after them, she hadn’t reacted to my words the first time.

“Go to the kitchen.”

“Did you hear me? I’m going home.”

“What do you want me to tell you? Go? Stay?”

I averted her gaze. “Mother, I have to.”

When I confessed my plan, my mother’s hands trembled around her teacup.

“You think I don’t want him buried properly?” Her voice cracked. “But you’re all I have left.”

I reached for her, but she pulled away. “If you go… don’t look back. Not at the ruins. Not at the past.”

The weight of her words settled in my chest. I realized my journey was beyond burying my father. It was a test of who I’d become in this war.

Reluctantly, I finished the tea and left to resume my duties at the charity kitchen.

I still hadn’t heard from Mazen, and as I walked, I looked around, hoping to catch a glimpse of him. He wouldn’t have ignored my text. Most likely, his battery had died, or he couldn’t find a place with a signal. In our situation, we didn’t blame anyone, and our feelings weren’t hurt.

Karma would be there as she promised. I was certain of that, but I still wanted a backup plan in case I didn’t return. Burdening Karma with

my mother and sister was too much to ask of anyone who wasn't family or a close friend.

When I reached the line, it was so long, and several people were pushing to get to the front.

I had to do the same without making excuses. I slipped past the barricade and took my spot in the serving line.

In the kitchen, the workers glared at my lateness.

One muttered, "Think you're special?"

I didn't answer. *Let them think me selfish. If I return, I'll make amends.*

If I returned.

Later in the afternoon, after the pots were empty and we finished cleaning up, I realized I hadn't picked up diapers for Amina. I looked at my watch and wondered if I still had enough time to complete that task. If my plans materialized and I left the following morning, there would be no one to do that.

I grabbed my ration from the shelf and turned to leave when I saw my mother leaning on the roof's wooden support. My heart fluttered, fearing the worst, but what could be more drastic than our current circumstances?

My legs struggled to move toward my mother, but I forced them to obey.

When I neared her, she said, "I'm going to the clinic."

I finally released the breath I held. No apology for forgetting was necessary, so I nodded.

"Karma is with Amina," Mother answered my unspoken question.

Dare I hope to see her when I return to our tent? But common sense kicked in. "I'll go," I said. "You go back to Amina. I'm done here."

I handed my mother the plastic bag and watched as she turned toward our shelter.

The clinic wasn't far.

As I made my way there, my mind was already in motion, figuring out how to get home the following day. I had already alerted the organizer that I wouldn't be in the kitchen for a few days and asked if he could arrange for someone to take food to my mother.

I wondered what I would encounter.

Checkpoints: New militant factions were distrustful of young men traveling alone.

The hum overhead of Israeli surveillance? They wouldn't hesitate if I ran.

Mass graves with makeshift markers where families buried their dead during the past many months' offensive. Would I even recognize my father?

And what would I find when I got home? Was my engineering future buried beneath the rubble? Would I ever help design the new structures I had long dreamed of?

16 — The Sea Does Not Ask Who Casts the Net

"We are a people who plant olive trees with one hand and hold fishing nets with the other." — Tawfiq Zayyad.

Then…

The dream of becoming an engineer began the day I realized Gaza's roads weren't just cracked but a map of our confinement. I traced their fractures like equations, calculating how much concrete it would take to rebuild what the drones shattered. But concrete was a luxury. So were universities.

My father knew this.

Religion wasn't part of my routine because it wasn't modeled for me, although I knew my father, deep down, believed in a god I found hard to believe in. How could any God allow what had happened to my people, I often wondered. Still, I questioned my beliefs.

I never saw my mother pray or heard her praise this invisible being called God. So, I didn't ask her about religion and decided to talk to my father one day while out at sea.

"Baba?"

A few minutes passed as my father concentrated on shifting the nets. He finally looked at me, giving me his attention.

"Why don't we go to the mosque?

Every Friday, while our neighbors knelt in prayer, we hauled nets under the sun.

"God hears me at sea," Baba said, his hands raw from salt and rope.

"But aren't we supposed to listen to the sheik and pray with others?"

"And who would earn a living?" my father said.

When I didn't respond, Baba added, "You must go to college."

Confused, I asked, “What does that have to do with Fridays?”

Baba turned to face me and just looked into my eyes.

Embarrassed, I lowered my gaze to stare at my feet. If he took Fridays or other days off, there wouldn’t be money for my future education. How could I have been so stupid to ask that question?

Father gently gripped my shoulder, forcing me to face him.

“Listen, son. Your education is what will lift us from this…” He paused. “You are our only hope. With aggression on land and sea, I’m not sure how long we can fish and feed ourselves.”

Rebuilding our home was expensive, and I watched my parents make sacrifices to save money for my future. Some parts of the house were still built with stacked stones and had a corrugated aluminum roof lined with asbestos. We thought this was ‘normal’ until I later learned about its health dangers during college.

Guilt weighed heavily on me. Not only had my father sacrificed personal comfort, but he also gave up time with fellow worshipers, as I came to understand the depth of his faith.

“I can fish. You go to Friday prayers,” I offered.

I was old enough to fish on my own, and had we had the financial means to build or buy another boat, we would have doubled our catch.

My father shook his head and repeated that God heard him, even out in this open sea and under the harsh sun that baked us to nearly charcoal, and wrinkled Baba’s face as if he were in his eighties, even though he couldn’t have been older than forty.

I never knew my parents’ ages and wouldn’t ask because it wasn’t something a kid would do.

A boat drifted nearby, and my mouth dropped open when I saw the garment the fisherman wore. A girl no older than me stood tall and proud in a small boat with three crates full of fish as she cast her net into the blue Mediterranean waters.

I never asked why he sacrificed prayer until the day I saw Waheeda.

She stood alone in a boat, her silhouette sharp against the horizon. No headscarf, no brother or father beside her, just a girl my age, mending a net with fingers as deft as any fisherman’s.

"Salamu alaikum," my father called.

She didn't turn. The wind carried the scent of her catch: sardines and maybe tuna.

"Who is that?" I whispered.

Baba's voice dropped. "Waheeda. Um Rami's daughter. Her father was taken last winter."

"Taken?"

A shadow crossed his face. We never said arrested and never martyred, just *taken*, a word for men who vanished into the hands of soldiers or the sea.

Waheeda cast her net again with fluid movements. The boat rocked, but she didn't stumble.

"She fishes alone?" I asked.

"The sea doesn't ask who casts the net," Baba said. "Only if they're strong enough to pull it back."

I watched her until she blurred into the glare.

That night, I sketched bridges in my notebook for cars and for people like Waheeda, who carried the weight of a family with no roads left to walk.

Years after the October 2023 offensive turned my university to rubble, I'd remember this morning, this girl, the quiet defiance wrapped in the simple act of casting a net. And I would tell myself, again and again, that there were places where courage looked different and a Palestinian girl could do whatever I could and maybe even better.

17 — No Permission Needed to Survive

"The Palestinian woman plants wheat in stone." — Palestinian saying.

Then…

I couldn't stop thinking about her.

That night, as Mazen, Khalid, and Issa gathered on the shore, I blurted out the question gnawing at me, "Who is Waheeda?"

Khalid exhaled sharply, as if I'd tugged a thread unraveling a story heavier than any of us. "Abu Rami's daughter. The one who fishes alone."

Mazen smirked. "You saw her? They say she curses louder than a sailor when the nets snag."

But Khalid frowned. "Her father taught her everything. Then the soldiers took him last winter."

A hush fell. We all knew what "took" meant. No trial. No body. Just another empty space in the mosque, another boat rotting on the shore.

I thought of my father, his hands calloused from Fridays spent fishing instead of praying for me. For my engineering books, my future. Would I end up just another "taken" man, my bones buried under rubble no degree could rebuild?

Khalid lit a cigarette, the glow painting shadows under his eyes. "First day she went out alone, they muttered prayers like she was a ghost. Her mother begged her to stop. 'People will talk,' she said."

"And Waheeda?" Issa leaned in.

"She kissed her mother's forehead and said, 'Let them say I feed my family.'"

Mazen had heard of her, and so had Issa, but Khalid knew her story and shared it with us. Um Khalid and Um Rami were friends, both

widowed and without outside support. In a society where traditional gender roles often limit women's work, Waheeda defied norms by taking up her father's trade to support her mother and two younger siblings.

Many families in Gaza struggled to survive because of the blockade, restrictions on fishing areas, and frequent destruction of boats by Israeli forces. Hiring help or relying on male relatives wasn't always an option. I knew that while some admired her courage as I did, others disapproved of a woman fishing alone, which made it harder for her to find support.

"Abu Rami taught her the rhythms of the Mediterranean before she could even swim. He'd let her steer the boat at ten, mend nets at twelve, and by fifteen, she could read the waves like a second language."

I'd seen it myself: Waheeda steering into the fog where Israeli patrols lurked, her knife flashing as she mended nets with hands already scarred at sixteen. Once, when drones forced the boats back, I spotted her knee-deep in the waves, screaming at the horizon like the sea owed her answers.

"She doesn't have a choice," Khalid continued.

With men frequently detained, killed, or unable to work due to restrictions, many women in Gaza took on roles traditionally held by men out of sheer necessity.

Waheeda's story reflected that of many Palestinian women who stepped into roles they never expected: becoming breadwinners, resistance fighters, or caregivers in a society under siege.

Her isolation on the water symbolized her defiance and the harsh reality that, in an open-air prison like Gaza, survival often meant standing alone against the waves. Waheeda's existence was a quiet act of resistance, showing that even under the harshest conditions, Palestinians find ways to endure.

"I heard him say, 'The sea doesn't belong to men." Khalid side-eyed us. "Abu Rami laughed when neighbors raised their brows. Can you believe that?"

Khalid shook his head. "It doesn't matter. It's still a man's job."

Issa rolled his eyes. "There are many women in men's professions."

The aspiring doctor went on to cite statistics for medical professionals, engineers, and politicians. We all heard of Hanan Ashrawi. No one could hold a candle to her abilities.

"But last winter, the soldiers came. They raided their home in the dead of night, shouting in a language no one understood. They dragged Abu Rami away with bound hands. Before they left, he calmly said, 'Take care of your mother.'"

Khalid shifted his gaze to the horizon. "He never came back."

We didn't ask. All four of us knew what that meant. Abu Rami was one of tens of thousands.

"She's like you," Khalid said suddenly, nodding at my notebook with sketches of roads and bridges. "Building what everyone says can't be built."

I flushed. My designs were just pencil on paper. Waheeda's defiance was mortar and steel.

The next morning, Waheeda woke before dawn, put on her father's old work clothes, and headed to the shore. The other fishermen watched silently as she untied her father's boat.

One man, old enough to be her grandfather, shook his head. "This is no place for a girl," he muttered.

She ignored him.

Her mother wept that first day, begging her to stay home. "People will talk," Um Rami whispered. "What will they say?"

Waheeda kissed her mother's forehead. "Let them say I feed my family."

At first, the men pretended she didn't exist. They turned their backs when she docked, whispered when she passed. Some even tried to block her boat, forcing her to steer wider into dangerous waters where Israeli patrols lurked.

But the sea remembered her.

She learned to fish in places where soldiers wouldn't see her, hiding in the fog when drones buzzed overhead. Waheeda sold her catch quickly to avoid the market where men might refuse to buy from her.

When her nets tore, she fixed them herself, her fingers bleeding from the coarse rope.

One day, as she brought in a small catch, an older fisherman who had known her father rowed up beside her. Without a word, he handed her a new net.

"Your father would be proud," was all he said before drifting away.

Some nights, when the blockade kept the boats onshore, Waheeda would sit on the beach and listen to the waves. She didn't pray like her mother did or beg God for mercy. Instead, she whispered to the sea, as if her father's spirit lingered in the salt and foam.

"Did you fight?" she once asked the dark water.

The waves didn't answer. But the next morning, she found a tattered piece of net tangled in the rocks—the same kind Abu Rami used to weave. She took it as a sign.

I saw her often after that first morning, always alone, always working. I wanted to ask her how she had done it, and how she had faced the soldiers, the whispers, and the endless weight of survival. But my father's words echoed in my mind, '*No one questions how food reaches their tables, only whether it does*.'

A week later, I found her wrestling a torn sail in the rain.

"Need help?" I called, bracing for her scorn.

She eyed me, then jerked her chin at the ropes. "Pull. Like your life depends on it."

We worked in silence until the nets held. As she turned to leave, she paused. "You're Emad. The one who draws cities in the sand."

"You've heard of me?"

"People talk." Waheeda wiped salt from her lips. "But sand washes away. The sea remembers."

Then she pushed off, leaving me standing there like a fool.

But as she sailed away, she called back, "Next time, bring better rope."

Waheeda never asked for help. But slowly, grudgingly, the fishermen began to accept her. They didn't praise her because that would shame them, but they no longer turned their backs. Sometimes, a crate of fish would appear at her doorstep. Sometimes, a repaired oar would be left by her boat.

And when the soldiers came again, firing warning shots near the harbor, it was Waheeda who stood at the front, her arms crossed in defiance.

"We have nothing left for you to take," she shouted.

Waheeda's story was of grit, of small rebellions in a world that tried to erase her. She didn't fish to prove a point; she needed to feed her family. But in a place where the sky was patrolled by drones and the shore lined with guns, her defiance was a kind of victory.

When I finally left for college, her words stayed with me. "*No one gives you permission to survive. You just do*."

18 — Bread, Olives, and Goodbyes

"Survival becomes more important than identity. It didn't matter who you wanted to be. It mattered how you could eat today."
— Omar Eid.

Now…

My mother's fingers dug into my wrist like roots clinging to barren soil. "I can't lose you, too."

Her voice carved deeper than the explosions outside, deeper than the guilt festering in my chest. I wanted to promise I'd return, but Gaza had taught us the cruelty of empty words.

I memorized her face in the dimness: the grooves around her mouth from a lifetime of clenched teeth, the way her eyelashes fluttered even in sleep, as if her body refused true rest. Would this be the last time I saw her? The question slithered through me like venom.

Amina sighed in her sleep, her hand curled around nothing. She didn't stir when the artillery rumbled. Oblivion was her only mercy.

The fisher girl's face surfaced in my mind: Waheeda, steering her boat through gunfire-lit waves. "No one gives you permission to survive," she'd said.

But my mother wasn't asking for permission. She was begging me to choose surrender over suicide.

I pressed my forehead to hers. "Karma will look after you." The lie tasted like dust.

I must've dozed off. Somehow, we'd learned to sleep between explosions, or perhaps we'd acclimated to our new reality: it didn't

matter. If it weren't the next tent that was targeted, it would be ours, and we would die soon anyway.

My phone had long died, so time was irrelevant. Now that I was awake, I might as well get going.

It didn't matter if I quietly moved about. My mother had a sixth sense that alerted her to every breath I took.

"That's it? You're going?" she murmured.

I kneeled beside her mat and lifted her hand to my lips. There was nothing to say, so I swallowed whatever words crept up my throat. All I wanted was her blessing. That would be enough for me to face whatever lay ahead.

"See you in a few days, inshallah," I finally said, invoking the invisible being called god.

"May God protect you," Mother said as she sat up cross-legged.

I looked at Amina as I rose to stand, peacefully sleeping. I envied her oblivion to what we'd become.

"Here." My mother shoved a plastic bag into my hands; it was her ration: half a loaf, two olives, a scrap of dignity.

I choked back a refusal. To reject it would be to reject the last thing she could give: the illusion of control.

With a final kiss on my mother's cheek and her hand, I turned to leave before I changed my mind. The tears swimming in Mother's eyes were too much to bear, and I had to believe Karma would look after Mother and my sister.

I left the tent and closed the flap, only carrying the plastic bag and my dead cell phone. I didn't need anything else as we'd grown accustomed to wearing the same clothes for days.

Mother and other women washed clothes in the sea and scrubbed them on rocks. Then, they hauled jugs of fresh water to rinse the salt off. The water ration was meager, and they used as little as possible for the task. Then, they laid the wet clothes on tent ropes or any available surface to dry them.

As I walked down the row between tents, I wondered if I should see Karma before heading north, but I changed my mind. I had to trust her word, and I didn't want anything to influence my decision to go.

Dawn bled at the edges of the sky as I joined the queue of hollow-eyed men. No one spoke. Words were luxuries now.

I gestured for the man next in line, alerting him to his turn. He acknowledged my unspoken words with a nod and moved to plug his phone into the charging bank.

Another left, and I took his place, stepping aside as my phone charged.

Making eye contact with a boy no older than twelve, I tapped my wrist and twisted my hand.

A boy with a soldier's stare said, "4:18."

The generators snarled, their fumes thick as the silence between us, as I waited for my turn.

If I headed out in half an hour, I would have darkness on my side, at least for a while. What I would do afterward, I had no plan. I didn't know what lay ahead except for stories told by others, and each was a unique experience, though all had a few things in common: there was no guarantee I would make it there or back alive, I wouldn't be prepared for what I would find at home, and it was barren between here and there.

While waiting, I broke a piece of bread and took a bite, chewing slowly to make it last.

A man thrust a cup of olives into my hands: five wrinkled stones, more precious than gold. I swallowed one whole, letting the salt sting my throat. I savored each like a king's feast. It wasn't much, but enough to ward off hunger pains.

While waiting, a conversation took place a few feet from me. Typically, I wouldn't listen in, but I had nothing else to do.

"The animals are blocking aid," said a young man my age.

"How do you know?" asked a boy standing beside him.

"Listen."

A radio spat static and Al Jazeera's hollow poetry. "'Worst humanitarian crisis'… 'deliberate dismantling of Palestinian life'…"

"The UN described the situation as the war's 'worst humanitarian crisis,' with the acting head of OCHA calling it a 'deliberate dismantling of Palestinian life.'"

A laugh scraped out of me. “They need a report to tell them what we breathe?”

The men didn’t smile. They knew what I did: Statistics were elegies.

“They don’t have the guts to see for themselves,” said another man.

At 47%, I yanked my phone from the charger. There was no message from Mazen.

The ruins watched me go. Crushed clinics where I’d once dreamed of engineering schools, playgrounds, fossilized into mass graves. My father’s bones waited somewhere in that wreckage.

My mind struggled with each step in a rhythm of “You’re leaving them to die.”

The next set of steps echoed, “You’re leaving to reclaim what was stolen.”

I touched the plastic bag, my mother’s sacrifice, Waheeda’s nets flashed before me, and the taste of olives that a stranger had gifted.

Gaza had taken everything but this: the stubborn will to cast a line into the dark.

19 — The Silence of Exhausted Hope

"Survival becomes more important than identity. It didn't matter who you wanted to be. It mattered how you could eat today."
— Omar Eid

Then…

When we evacuated, we had no time to gather anything. In the panic, we grabbed some clothes, bread, water, and other essentials, only to later wonder, "Why this?"

There was no warning or plan for us to suddenly leave our home. We had been under siege and endured a great deal, but we never thought an outright attack would happen to us. Maybe that was naive; perhaps it was wishful thinking. But in the end, we left.

I pushed Amina's wheelchair, loaded with her and the little we had taken, while my mother and father carried sacks of who knows what.

We moved south with thousands of others as airstrikes soon destroyed home after home… neighborhood after neighborhood behind us.

We didn't dare look back. We moved forward with the others, looking for shelter south of our home. By the time we reached the edge of our camp, my mom and dad were arguing, which was uncommon.

I turned just in time to see my dad walking toward our house. I stopped the wheelchair and grabbed my mom, who was chasing after him, begging her not to go and pleading with my dad to come back.

"Just go! Go!" he yelled. "I'll catch up with you in a few minutes."

"Where is he going?" I asked.

"To get the key," my mother replied.

I shook my head and turned the wheelchair to face our home, but I couldn't complete the turn as hordes of fleeing people pushed and shoved

past us, leaving us no choice but to move forward as my mother cried and clung to my arm.

Leaflets rained on us, but I didn't have time to stop to read them. Later, when we stopped to rest and wait for Father, I read one:

"Leave immediately to the south. Your life will be at risk, and anyone who chooses not to leave the north of the [Gaza] Strip to the south of Wadi Gaza may be deemed an accomplice in a terrorist organization."

This came one week after the Israeli army issued an ultimatum warning the 1.1 million residents in those areas to leave southwards—a warning and a promise.

Wadi Gaza was about ten and a half miles from the Al-Shati refugee camp where we lived, and we only made it three miles when it became difficult to push the wheelchair, and my mother's cries for my father wore me down.

We weaved our way out of the crowd to its edge, stopping for a few minutes to rest while others did the same.

My father never came, and we trudged south.

Amina thought it to be fun, waving at those around us with a stiff, crooked arm, except no one was amused, and none returned the gestures. Each focused on putting one foot in front of the other, trying to stave off hunger and exhaustion.

The scene was pure chaos and desperation. The road was bombed, leaving rocks and jagged earth to traverse.

Amina's smile faltered as her arm slowly dropped to her side. The air was thick with dust and the acrid scent of smoke, making each breath a struggle.

Around us, children whimpered, trembling with fatigue, while the elderly shuffled forward, their faces etched with pain. A man with a makeshift crutch hobbled past, his leg wrapped in bloodied cloth, his jaw clenched against the agony.

Mama tightened her grip on my hand, her fingers cold and rough. "We can't stop," she whispered, though her steps were now unsteady. "He's not coming."

But how much farther? The road seemed endless, a winding path of suffering with no sanctuary in sight.

Distant explosions rumbled like thunder, sending fresh waves of panic through the crowd. A woman ahead of us stumbled, her arms wrapped around a bundled child, her sobs muffled against the little one's body. No one had the strength to help her up — we could barely help ourselves.

Another child tugged at his mother's sleeve. "Are we going to die?" he asked in a too-fragile voice for a child of seven.

I swallowed the lump in my throat as I listened.

"No," the mother lied. "We're going to find safety."

As I looked around at the sea of hollow eyes and trembling limbs, I wondered if safety even existed anymore.

* * *

What should have taken less than five hours took us ten. By the time we reached Wadi Gaza, the last flickers of daylight had faded, leaving only the cold glow of the moon and scattered fires in the distance.

My mother leaned on me, heavy yet comforting to have her by my side, but my feet were raw, every step sending sharp jolts of pain up my legs.

Around us, people collapsed where they stood, too exhausted to search for shelter, too numb to care about the distant echoes of war.

The air smelled of sweat, blood, and damp earth. A few aid workers moved through the crowd, their faces drawn, their voices hoarse as they called out for the injured. But there were too many of us—too many children coughing, too many elderly groaning in pain, too many bodies just lying still.

I lowered Amina onto a thin blanket someone had abandoned, my mother's hands shaking as she brushed dirt from my sister's face.

"Rest," she murmured, though her eyes were glazed with exhaustion.

I sank to the ground beside them, my limbs heavy as stone.

Nearby, an old woman rocked, whispering prayers under her breath. A boy, no older than Amina, curled into a ball, his ribs visible

beneath his torn shirt. No one had food. No one had water. We had escaped the bombs, but now we were just waiting—waiting for help, waiting for dawn, waiting for death to either pass us by or take us quietly in the night.

Amina's fingers found mine. I squeezed her hand, my throat too tight to say a word.

Somewhere beyond the darkness, another explosion shook the earth. But here, in this wretched limbo, there was only silence: the kind that settled when hope was too tired to scream.

20 — Where the Jasmine Once Bloomed

"We walked with our heads high, our feet rooted in the rubble of our homes." — Mahmoud Darwish

Now…

Twenty miles to Khan Yunis. A distance I'd once biked in an hour. Now, with legs trembling from hunger and a spine bent under grief, it felt like crossing a continent.

I wasn't alone on this moon landscape—craters replaced homes and roads, and what was left of bombed buildings were skeletons or tombs of their owners.

Our group of six, then eight when two children joined, moved in silence.

The boy never spoke.

The girl carried words like stones. "I had a home. Now I beg."

I tore my bread in half and passed it to her. She ate like a bird, pecking at the crust. "My sister's name is Majeda," she whispered.

The name struck me like shrapnel. The girl with the bowl. Was it the same child? Gaza was a graveyard of echoes.

"What are you doing out here?" Amjad asked.

"Come. Come…" Abu Ali called to them.

Timidly, they approached, and we handed each a piece of bread and shared a bottle of water.

After much prompting, the girl, with a thin, burgundy shawl, lowered her gaze and said, "A year and a half ago, I had a home, a mother, a father, and five siblings; now, I only have one. Everything is gone."

Thanks to the endless bombs descending on our already thorny existence, we all once had a home and a family, but I remained silent. Those words never left my lips.

"I now have to beg to feed my sister." Tears pooled in her eyes.

"What's your name? How old are you?" I asked.

The girl looked so young to be out with a boy in the middle of a war.

"Muna. I'm twelve."

Curious, I asked, "Where's your sister? Why are you here?"

"She's with Um Ali." She paused, shrugged, then said, "Her kids died in a collapsed building."

No one interrupted her, and the boy remained quiet, his eyes vacant like the rest of ours.

"I overheard people talk about returning. Maybe it was you?" She looked at our group. "So I asked Um Ali to watch my sister. My sister begged me not to leave. I promised I would return and left without looking back. I was afraid to face the lie in Majeda's trusting eyes."

My mind wandered to the little girl with the bowl a few weeks back. Her name was Majeda, too. Was that the same girl?

"I stepped out of the tent before I had a chance to second-guess myself. The journey on foot with the travelers was long, and I didn't know what I would find once we returned to the refugee camp where we lived. Perhaps the glimmer of hope shining from a distance would take me to my mother's open arms, waiting for me," she said wistfully.

It was time to move. We wanted to discourage the kids, but none of us had justification for doing so since we were doing the same.

The group shuffled forward like zombies in movies I'd seen on my phone.

Many hours later, we arrived at what were once our homes. We collectively stopped and gasped. Only one recognized the area; the rest wondered where we were.

Muna peered from under her fringe but said nothing.

The boy ran, picked up a metal piece, and held it out for us to see.

A twisted metal scrap reading "Ab…bake…" in Arabic.

Memory ambushed me: the warmth of fresh bread, my mother's flour-dusted hands, the jingle of coins in my pocket.

Muna screamed.

She lunged for the rubble, digging with bare hands. "Mama!"

We pulled her back, her fingers bleeding, her shawl snagged on rebar. The boy yanked her up, his voice cracking as he said, “Yalla, no time for this.” But his tears betrayed him.

I recognized the colors, and my mind wandered to the days I stood in line, waiting for Abu Munir to bake the dough my mother kneaded early in the morning. I shook my head to rid myself of the images that were too painful to bear.

My eyes scanned what was left of the street, and I counted the steps to where my home used to be.

“Mama,” the girl cried.

She ran, losing a flip-flop, but she didn’t seem to care as the sharp rocks and debris assaulted her sole.

Three men tried to stop Muna, but she didn’t listen. She was determined to find her mother.

When Muna reached the collapsed building, she frantically called out and, with her bare hands, dug through the dirt.

Rough hands grabbed and lifted her. She kicked and fought back, then collapsed, her tears mixing with the dirt and cement.

“Yalla, get up,” the boy said. “There is nothing left for us here.”

Her eyes pleaded with him.

“No time for this.” He looked skyward.

I knew he didn’t mean what he said.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

The boy shook his head, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. He turned to Muna. “Yalla, get up. No time for this,” he repeated, helping her to her feet.

A lonely tear trickled down his cheek, and angrily, he swiped it with his sleeve.

We stood and stared at the remnants of our lives.

“Let’s go back,” a man said. “There is nothing for us here anymore.”

His voice was shaky, and his legs no longer seemed to hold him upright. Two men steady him. He straightened his thin frame and glanced at where we had come from.

I shook my head. I needed to get home. “You go, I told the group. I need to find my father.”

Osama stepped closer and rested his hand on my slumped shoulder. “I’ll go with you.”

Another gripped my arm. “We’ll wait for you.”

I almost laughed. Wait where? Beneath the drone-scorched sky? On the bones of their kitchens, their schools?

But I nodded.

“Uncle, can I go with you?” the girl asked. “You’re from the kitchen.”

“Stay here. I’ll be right back. You are safe with them.” I pointed to the group. Some sat on the rubble while others lay, closing their eyes.

My heart pounded as Osama and I headed home, feeling disoriented. The landscape no longer looked like the familiar neighborhoods. I carefully navigated through, scanning for familiar objects: a leftover sign, a billboard, even colored shutters; I had memorized their owners.

Ten minutes later, we arrived, and I took a deep breath. Seeing other homes destroyed was one thing, but seeing mine now, my father’s tomb, was entirely different. I was sure he hadn’t survived. There was nothing left of our camp or the surrounding area, and no one was in sight except for a few people searching for loved ones or anything to salvage.

My legs were weak, and I coaxed them to move forward.

Then I saw it.

The jasmine.

Our plant, the one my mother had nursed from a seedling, its roots threaded through the cracks of our courtyard wall. Now it clung to life, its leaves gray with dust, one stubborn blossom clinging to a withered stem.

Like the young girl, I wanted to shout, “Baba,” but the syllables stuck to the roof of my mouth, refusing to dislodge.

“Jasmine needs patience,” Mama had said, pressing my small hands into the soil. “Like Gaza. Like us.”

Now, the roots sprawled over Baba’s grave. The house was gone. The courtyard was a crater. But the jasmine, it remembered.

Osama tugged my sleeve. “Unsafe.”

I wrenched free.

The plant crumbled at my touch, petals scattering like ash. But beneath it, a corner of my father’s prayer rug, its green threads still vibrant.

I fell to my knees.

Slowly, I moved forward, Osama tugging my sleeve, urging me not to.

“Unsafe,” he said.

I didn’t care.

21 — Beneath the Rubble

"We are a people of memory. We remember because memory is the only home we have left." — Susan Abulhawa.

Now…

My fingers clawed at the rubble until blood mixed with the dust. Somewhere beneath this tomb lay my father, and the ancestral key he'd gone back to save. The key that had hung by our door for generations, its teeth worn smooth from turning the lock of a home that no longer existed.

Osama knelt beside me. "He is with the rest in Jannah."

Through blurred vision, I pleaded with my eyes. "So, just leave him? Like this?"

"Fuck this paradise!" I screamed, my voice raw.

Jannah didn't smell of jasmine. Jannah didn't have my father's hands, calloused from mending nets and my childhood scrapes.

Osama flinched but didn't argue. He understood: Gaza had taught us that grief is a debt paid in the currency of the living.

"You don't mean that," Osama said sullenly.

Oh, I did. I meant every word. The only place my father was: not with me.

I screamed at the injustice. I yelled at the fate that dealt us this hand in a game we didn't sign up for.

"Emad, my friend, if you find your father here… well…"

We were not friends. We were floatsam caught by the raging tide and cast in the desert of what used to be life.

Osama was right. While intellectually I knew my father would not be a person to bury, if he were still here, my heart screamed otherwise.

When I finally calmed down, I said, "Let me find just one thing…"

"What are we looking for?" Osama asked.

"A key." I didn't need to explain.

"Where was it?"

"By the door… but Baba went back to get it. I don't know…"

I walked around, looking for an entry point, but didn't see one.

Osama followed, and just when I was about to give up, as it was getting late in the afternoon, he pointed to where my bedroom used to be.

I turned on my cell and activated the flashlight, illuminating the crawl space within.

"Hold this!" I handed the phone to Osama, lay flat, and wriggled my way inside the debris.

When I wriggled into the wreckage of my bedroom, the darkness pressed like a second skin. The beam of my dying phone flickered over shattered concrete. There was no body, no key. Just the ghost of my father's voice:

"A key is just metal, Emad. What matters is who turns it."

I recoiled. Was that memory or madness?

Backing out, I spat dirt from my mouth. Failure tasted like rust.

I couldn't get far.

The urge to remain there was intense. Giving up and joining the tens of thousands before me was a distant call.

"Did you find anything?" The beam shifted as Osama must have done too.

Wriggling backward was my only option, and dejectedly, I gave in to my reality: no father. No key.

Osama turned off the light, handing me the phone. "Your battery is low. Better save what's left."

I dusted myself and returned to the front of the house, where a rusted can half-filled with water stood. I rinsed my hands and face, not caring what the liquid contained. It no longer mattered.

"Let's get back to the group," Osama urged.

Just before I turned to leave, the jasmine caught my eye. Although there was no way for it to return to life, I poured the rusted water on it. My mother had spent too many days caring for her plants, and the scent of the flowers permeated my memory so that I could almost smell them.

Then, I bent and grabbed a handful of dirt from around the plant, putting it in my pocket. Maybe, its feel would keep me connected to my home. My mind whirled with the memories of when my mother planted it.

Osama snapped me from staring, and we headed back to where we left the group, unsure if they would still be there.

We found them huddled, sheltered in what remained of a store they had cleared.

The group had built a fire in the corpse of a bakery.

In the middle stood a brick structure with a roaring fire that lit up the area, topped by a boiling pot on a grate.

Muna stared into the flames. "I want to be with my family," she whispered.

Abu Ali had pillaged a torn sack of flour from the destroyed bakery a few doors down. He later said he hoped we wouldn't be sick from eating it, and he had tried his best to dig into its middle, where there were no stones.

Munther dusted a serving dish, cracked at the edges, with the bottom of his shirt, and set it in the middle of the circle we had formed around the fire.

I sat cross-legged watching Muna and the boy whose name I still didn't know, feeling guilty. I wanted to end it all while these young souls were determined to live. That young girl and I shared emotions that were too old for her to bear. She was searching for her mother, and I for my dad.

Abu Ali stirred a pot of scavenged flour and wild greens. "Bismillah," he murmured, and we ate like animals, too hungry for grace.

We thanked Abu Ali and Munther, who had foraged for greens to cook, and each curled up on the dusty floor to sleep for a few hours before I returned to Khan Younes and what awaited us there.

For once, the stillness was unnerving. Hardly any bombs fell throughout the night, though the echo of fighter jets and the rumbling of tanks were our companions, reminding us not to submit to this false sense of security.

Silently, we headed south to Khan Younes and the tent that was now my home. The boy stayed close as we traveled, as if the closeness would replace our loss.

As we trudged back to Khan Younis, the bombs resumed. Muna walked toward the explosions until I grabbed her arm.

"Majeda needs you," I said.

She froze. A child forced to bear a woman's grief.

"Let them kill me," she muttered as she navigated the rough terrain. "I want to be with my family," she insisted.

Munir tugged on her arm, coaxing her to find shelter.

Hesitantly, she followed the boy and me as we hunkered beside a crumbling wall.

"Here," the boy said, looking at Muna's bleeding and blistered feet.

He handed her a pair of mismatched slippers that he had worn moments before.

Muna shook her head and mumbled a thank you.

"I'm Munir," he said.

The girl stared at him wide-eyed.

Munir, the baker's son, I realized with a jolt.

He averted his gaze.

Although I frequented the bakery, running errands for my mother, I hadn't seen or maybe hadn't paid attention to the baker's child. I wanted to ask him where his father was, but I held my tongue. These past months taught me there were questions better left unasked. The baker must be dead by now.

Munir held up the slippers, but it appeared Muna didn't want to deprive him of the only luxury he had. Reluctantly, he slipped his feet into them when the girl shook her head again.

"Maybe we can find you a pair on the way," he said.

When there was a lull after the last explosion, we resumed our journey.

"What school did you go to?" Osama asked me.

I shrugged. It no longer made a difference.

Suddenly, a loud explosion rocked us.

Afterward, the stillness was eerie, and the murmurs faded into the silence of the graves that once were our homes.

I touched the dirt in my pocket. The key was gone. The house was gone. But this broken circle of survivors sharing bread, this was the lock my father had meant to turn.

22 — Tin Cans and Jasmine Hope

"April's hesitation, the aroma of bread at dawn,
a woman's point of view about men,
the works of Aeschylus,
the beginning of love,
grass on a stone,
mothers living on a flute's sigh
and the invaders' fear of memories."
— Mahmoud Darwish, (We Have On This Earth)

Then…

"Yamma. I'll be back in a while."

"Where are you going?"

"Just out with Mazen."

Before I could close the door, my mother reached it first and held onto the handle.

"You promised."

Confused, I asked, "What did I promise?"

She glared at the empty olive oil tank and back at me. I had forgotten she wanted me to help her plant.

Three cans needed to be opened before we could use them for planting. With a teenage huff, I abandoned my plans with Mazen and got to work. Although I was overall a good son who cared for and helped my family, there were moments when I just wanted to be a kid.

My mother gave me an old, rusted knife, and I used a stone to pound the knife into the tin all around the top until I could lift it.

The cans fought back. Three blows with the stone before the first lid bent.

The knife slipped again, biting into my palm. I barely felt the sting, just the hot trickle of blood dripping into the soil, that iron-sharp tang mixing with the damp earth.

Mother's jasmine cuttings lay beside me, their perfume so heavy it clung to the back of my throat.

Somewhere beyond the wall, drones circled with that familiar, hated hum, like wasps drawn to rotting fruit.

By then, it was after five, and I wouldn't be allowed to go anywhere, so I resigned myself to completing the task.

"The tomato goes here." She pointed to a can I had placed among the vegetables. "You can put this one there, too."

I waited for instructions for the third can.

"Put this one by the door," Mother said, nudging the smallest plant toward me. "See, it will climb on the wires."

I lifted it gently. The roots trembled in my grip, pale and vulnerable.

This will outlive us, I thought. Long after the bombs, the jasmine will climb these ruins.

I set the jasmine down too hard, and soil scattered across the stoop.

Mother didn't scold me. She just pressed a damp cloth to my bleeding hand and said nothing.

My mother turned on the faucet, handed me the hose, and water trickled out. I placed it in the jasmine can and patted the dirt some more.

I didn't miss meeting Mazen that night, and I kept checking the plant as if doing so would make it grow faster.

Father came home late that evening, well after the sun had set, which made my mother and me worry and almost prompted me to go to the fish market to look for him.

The question, "Where is he?" was in my mother's eyes as she strode to the gate, looking in the direction he would come.

When a neighbor passed by, my mother called, "Have you seen Abu Emad?"

"Be patient, Um Emad, he'll be here, inshallah."

God willing, I mentally scoffed.

I'd heard this expression all my life. Still, when I looked at Amina, when I saw the occupation soldiers fire at our boats, and when I lived under restrictions of necessities that the rest of humanity enjoyed, I didn't believe there was one.

My father finally arrived, and the relief was palpable. He was beaming. It must've been a good catch day.

Sure enough, no sooner had we sat under the grapevine for our evening meal than my father said to my mother, "Thank God," and he handed her a wad of cash. "If this continues, we can finish the bathroom."

He nodded my way. "And you can go to college."

Mazen's impatient sigh cut through the evening air as he leaned against the sun-warmed gate, its wrought iron pressing geometric patterns into his forearm.

"What are you doing?" he groaned, kicking at a pebble that skittered across the cracked courtyard tiles. "Come on. Let's go."

The watering can's last few drops fell like silver tears onto the jasmine's roots. The scent was heady and sweet when it rose to meet me.

I ran a finger along the vine's new growth, the tender green shoots soft as Amina's eyelashes when she slept.

"You're killing me," Mazen moaned, draping himself dramatically over the gate.

I smiled to myself. My best friend moves through life with restless energy and impatience. While I could spend hours watching cucumbers twist their delicate tendrils around the trellis, Mazen barely paused to notice how the grapevine had stretched toward the jasmine this year, their leaves whispering secrets in the breeze.

Mother's silhouette appeared in the doorway against fading light. "Why are you standing there like stray cats?" she called, wiping flour-dusted hands on her apron. "Come in."

"We're leaving, Yamma."

She shook her head but said nothing.

The water bottle in my backpack sloshed as I swung it over my shoulder.

Mazen's fist connected with my arm in a playful but sharp punch. "Let's go downtown."

The market let out the day's heat as we arrived, its usual neon glow replaced by the flickering dance of kerosene lamps. My stomach clenched at the call to Maghrib prayer. Fourteen hours of fasting pressed against my ribs, and the air smelled of desperation and diesel, of qatayef frying in stolen moments before the generators failed again.

Abu Ahmed's shop greeted us with a wave of warm air as we entered. "Three hours of power today," he muttered, the kerosene lamp casting shadows beneath his eyes.

His daughter fanned herself with the fluttering pages of a school notebook. "Will the lights come back for taraweeh prayers?"

Her mother's kiss landed on sweat-damp hair. "We'll manage."

The lie tasted familiar.

Then, like magic, the street came alive. Vendors appeared from the shadows, their carts creaking under the weight of apricot juice and falafel. The scent of cardamom coffee mixed with generator fumes in a bittersweet embrace.

Khalid's grin flashed from a nearby stall, cradling black-market sweets like treasure.

The aroma of falafel made my mouth water. We should have been home, sharing iftar with family. But Mazen's grip on my elbow was firm, pulling me toward the sea where we could eat unseen, and where we wouldn't have to face the hollow stares of those with empty plates.

Old Man Hisham's empty baskets told their own story. "No harvest this year," he said.

Nearby, children's laughter echoed through bullet-riddled concrete, their soccer game weaving through the ruins.

That night, I sat cross-legged on the floor cushions with my family, while my father's radio crackled with promises: "Rafah crossing might open, supplies might come."

Mother's whispered "Inshallah" trembled in the dark.

When Eid arrived, there were no fireworks. Only the sticky sweetness of shared maqluba, the way Amina's eyes lit up at her piece of chocolate, and the warmth of Father's hand on my shoulder as the final prayer echoed through streets that refused to die.

As lantern light seeped through our makeshift curtains, I understood: Our victory was in Abu Munir's flour-dusted hands, giving away bread. In the jasmine stubbornly climbing our shattered wall. In Father's voice, steady as roots in a storm, whispering to the night:

"We're still here," as if answering the drones outside. "And that's a kind of victory."

23 — Feast of Dust

"We break our fast to the sound of airstrikes,
and pray taraweeh by the light of phone screens."
— A voice from Gaza, March 2024

Now…

As we trudged south, Osama was now quiet, and my thoughts traveled to previous Ramadans and holidays with the family. Although it was not an easy time, we were filled with joy as the season brought. This past Ramadan was different…

The first adhan of Ramadan no longer came from minarets. It echoed from a teenager's phone, balanced on the broken dome of what was once Al-Hassan Mosque.

Men and women emerged from tents and shattered homes, unrolling prayer mats over concrete dust still warm from yesterday's bombs.

The qibla direction was guessed; no one had phone data to check. Rows formed anyway, bare feet pressing into debris where carpets once lay. When the electricity died mid-rak'ah, no one faltered. The prayers continued in whispers, memorized verses rising like smoke.

I stood nearby, staring at the sea of haunted faces. My mother had insisted I join the prayers, and reluctantly, I obeyed.

"Eight percent left," Khalid warned as they climbed down to stand beside me.

That evening, I joined Yusef's family, who gathered around what his mother called "the feast:" a pot of murky water with scraps of wilted greens, the scent of cardamom only a memory.

Aya, seven years old with eyes too old for her face, kept glancing at the sky.

"Remember last year's qatayef?" Um Yusef asked, stirring the pot.

The sweet shops that once lined the streets existed now only in Aya's drawings of stick-figure bakers with missile holes where their hearts should be.

I slipped away and returned to my mother. My allotment of food was dwindling by the day, and when I gave it to her, she only said, "Thank you, my son."

No complaints. No whimpering.

The lack of food had begun to take its toll. Amina, now a skeleton, hardly whimpered, and my mother had to force-feed her to keep her alive.

My mother's face was hollow, and where her once rosy cheeks made her youthful, she now looked like a woman of eighty.

As I walked beside Osama, I wondered how they were in my absence.

But our life was still better than others', and for that, I was grateful, although it was a struggle to feel that way.

My mind drifted to a few months back when a blast rattled our tent in the middle of Ramadan. Neither my mother nor I flinched, though Amina's eyes widened in response.

"Allahu akbar," the man in the next tent yelled.

I bit into a date so shriveled it tasted like dust.

Dawn on the third day of Ramadan brought gunfire instead of sunlight. I joined the swarm of bodies rushing toward the Kuwaiti Roundabout, where rumors of flour had spread like wildfire.

"They're shooting at us!" someone screamed as we ran.

I saw the trucks first. Bodies lined the streets, surrounding the white UN vehicles. A man clutched a bleeding child, both painted red with flour and blood.

When the flour massacre happened, where 118 people were killed chasing UN aid trucks, the survivors still whispered "Allahu Akbar." Not in triumph, but in grief, because even death must be answered with faith.

A boy no older than eight returned to his make-shift home empty-handed, his shoes caked in pink mud — wheat flour mixed with blood.

Suhoor was eaten in darkness, timed by the drones' 2 a.m. sorties. No one complained when the meal was just salt and bread.

"Niyyah (intention) is what matters, not the plate."

The bombs always came hardest at 2 AM, before we eat suhoor, when the white light of dawn appeared. It was not permissible to eat after the Fajr call to prayer because this was the time for the beginning of the fast. This gave us the energy and hydration needed for the day of fasting ahead.

I had charged my phone just enough to play 47 seconds of last year's Ramadan in Jerusalem: the glowing Dome, the sticky sweets, and the laughter.

A missile screamed overhead. The screen went black.

Eid morning arrived with no new clothes, no fireworks. Just a shared pot of maqluba cooked over a scavenged fire, the rice blackened at the edges.

I tucked a mint leaf behind my sister's ear.

"Eidiyeh," I said, a gift when there were no gifts left.

The Eid prayer was held in a bomb crater. No *khutbah* about celebration, just seventeen men reciting Al-Fatiha for the dead wrapped in UNRWA tarps beneath the watchful eye of a buzzing drone.

As they walked back, six-year-old Aya kicked a shattered Ramadan lantern. Its metal ribs screeched like the warplanes at dawn.

"Next Ramadan will be better," their mother said.

The lie hung heavier than the smoke over Rafah.

That night, I dreamed of a muezzin who wasn't on his phone, of qatayef that didn't crumble to ash in my mouth, of bombs that, for once, respected prayer times.

When I woke, the war was still there.

But so was I.

The road back to Khan Younes was long, not in terms of miles but in time. With a constant threat of bombs or drones attacking the small group, they had to shelter until it was safe to walk again.

For the most part, Muna and Munir were quiet, trusting the adults they were with. Now and then, they would exchange silent glances, and my mind whirred with thoughts that had been at bay over the past year and a half.

I hadn't stopped to think, really *think* about how kids were handling the trauma. My only reference was Amina, and she wasn't like the others.

Who's looking after the orphans, injured, and amputees whose parents were killed?

What would happen to this generation without school?

So many other thoughts bombarded me that I had no answers to, and perhaps I never would.

Overhead, jets whizzed by, and we took cover in the hollowed-out remains of what once was a store. Muna's eyes darted to the doorway every time the wind rattled the broken hinges.

"You okay?" I whispered.

She nodded, but the way her fingers dug into Munir's sleeve told me otherwise.

A distant explosion shook the ground, sending dust drifting from the ceiling. The kids didn't flinch. That was the worst part—they were used to it.

I thought of Amina again, how she had screamed at the first sound of shelling when the war began. Now, she barely blinked. What did that mean?

Munir tugged at my sleeve. "Emad… do you think we'll make it back?"

I hesitated. But hope was the last currency we had left.

"I hope so," I said.

Muna's jaw tightened, and she glared at me. Most likely, she knew better than to believe in easy answers.

We moved again, sticking to the shadows. The streets were eerily silent except for the occasional wail of a siren or the far-off thud of artillery. Every bomb crater told a story—a home, a family, a life erased in seconds.

A sudden burst of gunfire sent us scrambling behind a collapsed wall. Munir's breath came in short, panicked gasps. Muna clamped a hand over his mouth, her eyes wide.

"Breathe," I whispered. "Just breathe."

The gunfire ceased as quickly as it had started. False alarm, maybe. Or someone else's tragedy unfolding nearby.

We kept moving.

When we finally reached the outskirts of Khan Younes, the sky was beginning to lighten. The city was a skeleton of what it had once been—buildings reduced to jagged teeth, streets littered with debris.

A group of volunteers in fluorescent vests moved through the ruins, pulling bodies from the wreckage. Muna stopped walking.

"What is it?" I asked.

She didn't answer. Just stared at a bloodied baby's shoe abandoned on the road, her face blank. Then she took Munir's hand and stepped over it.

I followed, my chest heavy with the weight of all the things I couldn't fix, all the wounds that couldn't be healed. For the first time in months, I thought of Issa, who wanted to be a doctor. Did he survive? Was he able to help?

Many as young as twelve became medics through on-the-job training. They carried the wounded and the dead to what was left of hospitals and tent clinics. Sometimes, they carried body parts that could not be put back together to form the human that once was.

My stomach churned at the thought. I wanted to measure lines and crunch numbers to design structures, not stir stew in pots and watch small orphaned children begging for food.

Maybe Issa, a friend from my teen years, had found his calling amid the chaos that had now defined our lives. Perhaps he was saving someone's life or amputating a useless limb. I shook my head at the thought. He was in Germany, having the time of his life.

Osama and I forged an unlikely friendship as we would have had nothing in common when things were 'normal.' But now, we shared too much grief, trauma, and an uncertain future as we neared Khan Younes right at dawn.

The sun rose, casting long shadows over the broken earth. Somewhere in the ruins, a voice called out for survivors.

No one answered.

24 — Goals Without Nets

"To be a Palestinian is to be haunted by memories of a lost past and a future that is always out of reach." — Edward Said.

Then…

We kicked around a soccer ball for a while. Two other teens, Khalid and Issa, joined Mazen and me, and the match was on.

The ball was a patchwork of duct tape and hope, its faded leather barely holding air. It skidded over the uneven field when Khalid kicked it hard, and Mazen chased it. It bounced wildly off a chunk of concrete that hadn't been there last week.

I lunged, my sandals slipping on dust and dead grass. The ball rolled toward Issa, who trapped it under his foot with precision.

Then, the sound.

A low, insect-like hum vibrating in the back of our teeth before it reached our ears.

We froze mid-step. Four pairs of eyes snapped upward, scanning the bleached-blue sky. The drone wasn't close yet, but its presence coiled around us like a noose.

Khalid spat. "Northern sector."

Sometimes, we stopped to scan the horizon for smoke.

Mazen muttered, "Keep playing?"

I wasn't particularly athletic, though I tried basketball and soccer, but failed miserably and soon abandoned playing on a team. Still, I enjoyed the simple pleasure of running across the uneven field with my friends, the ball bouncing unpredictably over patches of dry earth and stubborn weeds that refused to die no matter how many times we trampled them.

The match was chaotic, as it always was when we played. There were no real rules, no referee to call fouls, just four boys laughing,

shoving, and arguing over whether the ball had crossed the makeshift goal line marked by two discarded sandals.

Khalid, the fastest of us, darted past Mazen with ease, his bare feet kicking up dust as he charged toward our "goal:" a space between two crumbling bricks.

Issa, ever the strategist, hung back, waiting for the perfect moment to intercept a pass.

I was the weakest link, but Khalid deliberately passed to me even when he was open for a shot.

We were typical teens in all things that mattered, although living in a not-so-typical situation. We bantered, snuck around to do things we weren't supposed to, and once I skipped school with a few boys. That didn't turn out well, and I suffered as a result.

Our neighborhood was tightly knit, and nothing much escaped the adults, who promptly would inform other parents of what their children did or didn't do.

My father's shake of the head and my mother's sad and silent expression were punishment enough for me never to attempt missing school again.

Although occasionally, my father lectured me when I didn't do what I was supposed to, overall, there was no yelling from either parent. They expressed their disappointment in unspoken words, which was far worse than an outward burst of anger. Their silence was a language of its own, one I understood perfectly: We expected better from you.

Mazen's parents, on the other hand, were the opposite. They screamed, and his mother chased him with a slipper raised high to throw it at him or hit him with it. She never succeeded, but sometimes I wished my parents had done that, too.

It wasn't until much later, when perusing social media, that I discovered it was a form of child abuse, and I vowed never to hit my children if I ever had any. But I also promised myself not to give them the silent treatment either.

The soccer ended, and we moved to basketball. The ball limped pathetically, and we abandoned the physical activity.

We walked to the beach and sat on the still warm shore, close to the water, as the waves methodically crept toward us, then retreated.

I unpacked my bag and laid out tomatoes, oranges, and grapes. Mazen, as usual, had the sweets, and the other two boys had nothing. We shared the food as we exchanged stories and plans for our futures.

As usual, once we finished eating, we pulled out our cell phones to browse the latest social media updates, which had become a staple in our lives. We took turns sharing songs, funny memes, and what was trending that none of us could afford, but it was fun to watch.

Issa, who had the best phone among us, played a new Western song he'd downloaded, the bass thumping through the tiny speaker.

Khalid groaned and threw a handful of sand at him. "Enough of this noise," he said, grinning. "Play something real."

Issa rolled his eyes but switched to Fairuz, her voice rising like smoke over the quiet waves. Suddenly, the transmission ceased, and Issa hummed the rest of the song. We'd listened to it so often we'd known it by heart.

The sky darkened, the sea murmured beside us, and the stars were just beginning to appear; it was easy to forget where we were. Easy to pretend we were just four ordinary boys, with ordinary lives, and ordinary futures waiting for us.

The sun hung low over the Mediterranean, casting a golden glow on the battered buildings of Al-Shati. The air smelled of salt and smoke, a reminder of the sea's promise and the scars of the Great March of Return protests that had raged along the border for weeks.

We had seen the news, the funerals, and the ambulances rushing to the hospital, overwhelmed by the massive load of the injured and dead.

Tonight, Mazen, Khalid, and Issa sat on my rooftop, trying to ignore the distant echoes of gunfire from the eastern fence. We were fifteen, old enough to understand the weight of our reality but young enough to still dream beyond it.

Issa pressed his palm over the bullet pockmark as if trying to stop the past from bleeding into the present. “When I’m a doctor,” he said, “I’ll build a hospital where kids don’t bleed out waiting for permits.”

Mazen smirked. “With what? The UN’s always cutting funds. And Egypt keeps closing Rafah.”

Emad scowled. The words hit too close to home.

Khalid leaned back. “And what if Israel denies your exit like they did Ahmad’s brother last year?”

Issa’s jaw tightened. His cousin had been shot in the leg during the March protests; his application for medical treatment abroad was still pending. “Then I’ll study online. I’ll learn everything I can. Gaza needs doctors more than ever now.”

The others fell silent.

I thought about the videos from the protests with teenagers like us, carrying nothing but flags and falling to sniper fire.

I flicked a pebble off the roof. “I don’t just want to fix people. I want to fix this.” I gestured toward the camp, where entire blocks still lay in ruins from the 2014 conflict. “I’ll design buildings that can withstand anything.”

Issa snorted. “You think Israel will let you import steel? They’ll say it’s ‘dual-use’ and block it at Kerem Shalom.”

Indignant, I said through gritted teeth. “Then I’ll find another way. Maybe underground, like the tunnels. Or with recycled materials.”

Khalid shook his head. “Or you could go to Turkey. They’re hiring engineers to rebuild Syria.”

I clenched his fists. “And do what? Send money home while Gaza crumbles? No. This is my home.”

The others didn’t argue. They’d all seen the protests and the desperation and the anger.

Khalid spun a worn soccer ball on his fingertip. The same one he’d kicked through the alleyways during the last ceasefire. “You all talk about staying. I just want to play.”

I rolled my eyes. “Gaza’s stadium was bombed in fourteen. Where will you train? On rubble?”

Khalid grinned. “Mo Salah came from a village. I just need one scout to see me. Maybe at the next match in the West Bank.”

Issa laughed. “With the PA and Hamas fighting again? Good luck getting a permit.”

Khalid’s smile faded. He’d tried out for a regional team last year, but the Israeli authorities denied his travel request. “There’s always Egypt or Qatar. If I can just get out...”

The rest of us exchanged glances.

“Egypt? Qatar? You’ll be lucky if they let you clean toilets in Tel Aviv,” Issa snorted.

Mazen had been quiet, scribbling in the same notebook he’d used to document the protests.

I nudged him. “What about you, poet? Still writing for the world?”

Mazen hesitated. “You think the world gives a shit about us unless we scream?” He glared at me. “The BBC calls protesters ‘rioters.’ CNN shows the rockets but not the checkpoints.”

Issa raised an eyebrow. “And you think your words will change that?”

“The world listened to Malala. Why not us?” Mazen asked.

Khalid stretched. “Or you’ll end up like Ahed Tamimi, in prison for a Facebook post.”

I watched Issa’s grip tighten on his pen. His brother had been arrested after sharing a video of a protest.

“Then I’ll write about that too.”

I turned to my friends. “Ten years from now, we’ll meet here. No matter what.”

Mazen tucked his notebook away. “And I’ll make sure the world remembers tonight.”

The Great March of Return had shown us the cost of hope, but it hadn’t killed our dreams.

Not yet.

The call to prayer mingled with the hum of an Israeli drone.

We stood, brushing dust off our clothes. Below us, vendors sold scarce fuel, kids played soccer between piles of rubble, and the occasional wail of an ambulance.

25 — The Guilt I Could Not Outrun

"Where should we go after the last frontiers? Where should the birds fly after the last sky?" — Mahmoud Darwish

Now…

The charging line snaked between tents, a queue of the living waiting to reconnect with ghosts. I shifted my weight from foot to foot, watching my phone's battery percentage tick upward with agonizing slowness. The man ahead of me smelled of burnt plastic and sweat. Behind me, a child whimpered about the dark.

When my turn finally ended, I went to the kitchen first, following some stupid instinct to report for duty even now.

The smell hit me before I saw it: acrid smoke clinging to warped metal pots, the sweet-rot stench of spoiled food spilled across scorched earth.

My fingers found my lips without thinking, as if to trap the scream inside.

Then I ran.

My feet moved before my mind could form thoughts, kicking up sand that stung my eyes.

Our tent wasn't destroyed, it was erased. It was just a black stain on the earth, still warm beneath my knees when I collapsed.

"Where's Um Emad?" My voice came out shrill, cracking like a boy's.

I grabbed at arms, at shirts, at anything that might anchor me.

Abu Mustafa's gnarled hands closed around my wrists, his grip stronger than his skeletal frame suggested.

The women's wails drew me to the source. My mother's fists against my chest didn't hurt as each blow landed with each accusation.

"God will punish you," she sobbed, her nails drawing blood through my shirt.

The other women had to peel her off me.

One of the women yelled, "Um Emad, stop! It's God's will."

My mother collapsed at my feet, clutching my legs with desperation.

I scanned the faces surrounding me, but the words were trapped in my throat.

That was when the realization came in waves:

First, the silence where her laughter should've been.

Then, the lightness of my mother's grip without Amina's weight between us.

Finally, the wheelchair's absence. They'd buried it already.

No body to wash. No grave to visit. Just this guilt settling in my bones. *I should have been here. I could have...*

It was now another guilt I would carry until my last breath. If I were there when the bomb landed, I could have…

The air tasted like melted wiring and charred hope. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, and it came away black. Around me, the camp moved in jagged rhythms: women rocking back and forth like broken metronomes, men sifting through debris with hands already bleeding through makeshift bandages.

Amina's wheelchair had left grooves in the dirt by the tent flap. I traced them now with shaking fingers, the metal tracks ending abruptly where the explosion's teeth had bitten clean through.

Her favorite blue scarf, the one she'd wave at passersby, fluttered from a scorched tent pole twenty meters away.

"Emad." Abu Mustafa's grip was all bone. "The recovery teams have already—"

I wrenched free so hard we both staggered. "She was here! She couldn't run—she couldn't—"

The words dissolved into a choked sob. My knees hit the ground, the sharp edges of rubble cutting into my skin, but I barely felt it. The pain inside was worse.

My mother's screams still rang in my ears. *"God will punish you!"*

Maybe He already had.

My palms found something soft in the rubble. A stuffed rabbit, one ear missing. Not Amina's. I still pocketed it.

Karma found me elbow-deep in the wreckage of someone else's life. Her fingers barely brushed my shoulder before I whirled on her.

"They dragged your mother out," she said quietly. "Amina was already—"

"Don't." The word tore my throat raw.

"Come," she whispered. "They're gathering the survivors near the clinic. Your mother needs you."

I wanted to scream that I needed someone, too. That I needed Amina. I needed to turn back time and stay, rather than leaving to find a lost key. But time didn't work that way.

When I finally stood, my legs threatened to give out again.

The camp was a graveyard of tents, the air thick with grief. I saw boys who had kicked a ball on the shore two days earlier, old men who had once shared their bread with us; they were all hollow-eyed, all broken.

The clinic was a gallery of ghosts. My mother sat propped against a wall, her eyes fixed on some point beyond the sea. When I touched her wrist, her skin was cold as the metal I'd been digging through.

"Yamma." I pressed our foreheads together. Her breath smelled of blood and burnt sugar. "I'll find who did this."

Her laugh was like scraping a spoon against an empty pot.

I wanted to rage at her and demand why she hadn't pulled Amina out first. Why had she survived?

The thoughts shamed me even as they took root.

Night fell like a burial shroud.

Somewhere in the dark, a toddler kept crying for a mother who wouldn't answer. Somewhere else, a man prayed aloud in a trembling voice. The sounds mingled with the distant growl of tanks, their

searchlights cutting across the clouds as if searching for another spot for a massacre.

Karma had left. I needed to find her, but I couldn't leave my mother.

We sat in silence for hours, interrupted by my mother's heart-wrenching sobs. When exhaustion got hold of her, she lay on her side and slept right there in the sand under the angry sky.

I arranged my jacket over my mother's shoulders, the fabric still reeking of smoke, and closed my eyes.

Amina's innocent face hovered behind my lids. The memory burned worse than the smoke in my lungs.

We had no other safe place, and it would be the next day, if not several more days, before we were given another tent.

26 — The Weight of Hunger

"We don't need memories—we need bread.
History won't feed us when we're starving." — Najwan Darwish

Now…

The morning arrived in shades of gray and trembling limbs. My body protested each movement, my back was stiff from the cold ground, and my stomach gnawed at my ribs with animal insistence.

Mother lay so still, I pressed two fingers to her wrist, needing the proof of that thready pulse beneath paper-thin skin.

She was alive for now.

"Yamma."

Her eyelids fluttered open, pupils dilating as reality crashed back in waves. I watched her hands clench. First in the fabric of her dress, then in the sand, as if trying to anchor herself to this new nightmare.

I gripped the wall, sheltering us, and lifted myself on shaky legs. Filth and grime covered me from the trek to the North, as well as the remnants of smoke and ash. I didn't dare long for the "normal" days of showers and a full table.

There was no kitchen to go to, and where my next meal would come from, I couldn't guess.

"I'll find food." The words rang hollow, even to my ears.

Her grip on my pant leg was surprisingly strong. "Stay."

Just one word, but it carried the weight of all we'd lost. The kitchen's charred remains. Amina's wheelchair. The way the soil from home was heavy in my pocket, unearthed but useless.

Around us, the camp stirred. A woman rocked silently, her arms cradling nothing. An old man coughed up something dark into his palm. The air smelled of burnt plastic and unwashed bodies, the scent of our collective unraveling.

"They say there's aid near the checkpoint," I lied.

"They say many things." Her fingers uncurled from my clothes, leaving ghostly impressions in the fabric. "God took her before the flames came. A mercy."

I flinched. This wasn't the raging mother of yesterday. This hollow-eyed woman scared me more.

"I took it out on you. I am mad at God, your father, and you! Why does this keep happening to us? What have we done to the world? We just want to live… like everyone else."

There were no tears in my mother's eyes, only unfettered grief tinged with anger.

"Yamma. I had to go."

"What did that accomplish? Did you bury your father?"

Shame cloaked me as I shook my head.

I felt the depth of my mother's sigh in my core.

"I couldn't get to him… I didn't find the key…"

"Is everything destroyed?"

Mother knew the answer, but I was glad she was talking to me. Her silence was agonizing.

"God took her," she repeated. "Before the fire."

A slight relief lifted the heaviness in my chest, but the guilt remained. Amina died in my absence. I should've been there for her and my mother.

"How?"

"It was her time to go. God's will."

Her words shook me. Mother repeated what everyone says when their loved ones die or are murdered. This wasn't like her. But I understood it was easier to blame an invisible force to ease the pain of loss. I was still not there yet and unsure if I'd ever reach that point.

"Yamma. I need to find us a tent and food." I looked around. "Go there," I said, pointing at a common shelter, hoping someone would look after her while I was gone.

This time, she didn't attempt to stop me.

The walk north was a procession of ghosts. A boy no older than ten dragged a sack twice his size. A pregnant woman paused every few steps, hands braced on her knees. We'd all learned the same lesson: to keep moving or become another body in the sand.

The first explosion tore through the morning with brutal clarity. No warning sirens this time. Just the earth shuddering beneath our feet, then the heat, that visible ripple in the air.

I tasted blood before realizing I'd bitten my tongue.

Screams erupted, but the second blast swallowed them.

People scattered, but there was nowhere to go, just sand and rubble and the open, burning sky.

I dropped to my knees, hands over my head, as debris rained down. Something sharp grazed my arm, but the pain barely registered.

Then, chaos erupted in slow motion. A man clutching his ears. A child's sandal, spinning in the dust. The aid trucks were now burning skeletons, their cargo of hope turned to ash and twisted metal.

I found myself running before deciding to move. Back to Mother. Back to the only anchor I had left.

She wasn't where I'd left her.

The world tilted dangerously. Then I spotted her kneeling beside an old woman, their heads bent together. Praying? No. Passing something between them. A crust of bread, broken in half.

Mother saw me coming. Held out her palm. A single date rested there, wrinkled and precious.

I sank beside her. My arm stung where the debris had cut me, but the blood was already drying. A small wound. A lucky one.

"They bombed the trucks," I said.

She exhaled, long and slow. "Of course they did."

Silence settled between us, thick and suffocating. I wanted to apologize. For leaving. For failing. For being alive when Amina wasn't. But the words turned to ash in my mouth.

"We share," she said, halting my thoughts.

It wasn't forgiveness. Not yet. But a beginning.

As the date's sweetness dissolved on my tongue, I noticed the old woman's feet. They were bare and swollen, the same size as Amina's.

I slipped off my sandals without a word.

The cold crept in like a thief, stealing what little warmth our bodies had hoarded. I pressed against my mother's side, feeling each of her ribs through the thin fabric of her dress.

Around us, the camp breathed in shallow gasps. Children whimpered in their sleep, and old men coughed into clenched fists. The air smelled of unwashed skin and charred dreams.

Amina came to me in fragments.

First, her bright laughter, the hiccuping sound she made when I pretended to steal her figs. Then her small hands, sticky with juice, pressed against my cheeks. For three heartbeats, I believed she was still here.

The explosion came as dreams often did in Gaza without warning. I woke choking on phantom smoke, my fingers clawing at dirt instead of bedsheets.

The horizon pulsed red like an open wound. Rafah was burning again. Or maybe Khan Younis. After a while, the locations began to blur together.

My mother was already seated, her silhouette sharp against the glow of the fire.

"We go south," she said, as if continuing a conversation we'd been having for years.

My tongue felt thick with sleep and dread. "The border's—"

"A trap." She cut me off with a gesture toward the glow. "Like everything else."

The truth settled between us. There was no safe direction. No right choice. Only different flavors of dying.

Dawn arrived gray and hesitant. Around us, people stuffed rags into plastic bags and tied their shoes with broken laces.

A woman wrapped her infant in a UNHCR tarp. An old man folded his prayer mat with trembling hands.

I watched my mother roll our single blanket tight enough to fit in her bag. The way her fingers lingered on the fabric Amina had last touched. The careful way she avoided my eyes.

"Where?" I asked again.

She shouldered the bag. Her silence was answer enough.

27 — The Tide That Pulled Us Apart

"When the homeland becomes a suitcase, the airport becomes a homeland." — I Saw Ramallah

Then…

We spent our final high school years stealing moments between power cuts, pilfering cigarettes from inattentive kiosk owners, our hands shaking not from fear but laughter as we choked on the first bitter drags behind bomb-crumbled walls. The smoke burned our throats in a way that felt like rebellion.

Mazen held court on girls he'd never kissed, his elaborate fantasies punctuated by Khalid's dramatic eye rolls. I pretended not to listen while memorizing every word.

On stolen afternoons, we'd ditch class for the seafront, letting salt crust on our lips as we debated free will versus fate as if we had either.

The fractures came slowly. Khalid's soccer cleats appeared more often than his schoolbooks, the leather worn thin from desperate training. Issa's phone buzzed constantly with European area codes, each vibration widening the gap between us. We pretended not to notice how his uniform remained crisp while our UNRWA-issued uniforms frayed, or how his water bottle never tasted of chlorine.

Despite Issa's wealth, they were still Palestinians living in Gaza and under occupation; financial status was meaningless.

But not entirely. Money couldn't stop bombs, but it could buy a way out. And that was the unspoken truth that gnawed at us: Issa's family had options.

One sweltering August afternoon, as the Mediterranean stretched out before us, Issa's phone rang with that particular trill that meant an

international call. When he returned from the call, his shadow fell across our circle differently.

"Uncle in Berlin," he said, crushing a soda can underfoot. "Student visa came through."

Mazen's congratulatory slap landed too hard.

Khalid's "Mabrouk" tasted of seawater.

I counted the waves instead of speaking: seven crests before the silence broke.

That night, the drones' whine kept rhythm with my racing thoughts. In my mind's eye, I saw our futures unfold: Issa in some snow-covered German library, Mazen elbow-deep in cement dust, and Khalid's face on a martyr poster fluttering against bullet-pocked concrete.

And me?

I was suspended between engineering textbooks and the ever-shrinking borders of this open-air prison.

The salt air crept through my window, carrying the scent of burning tires from the latest protest. Somewhere beyond the blockade, Issa's plane was already waiting. We'd sworn we were brothers, bound tighter than blood. But Gaza taught us cruel truths: even iron rusted when exposed to enough seawater.

The schoolyard buzzed with a nervous energy that even the summer heat couldn't smother.

We stood in uneven rows, our donated gowns scratching at sunburnt necks and the polyester smelling of someone else's pride.

Mazen kept elbowing me. "Watch them drop the bombs right as we get our diplomas."

I bit my lip to keep from laughing. Only in Gaza could graduation feel like standing in a target circle.

The boys tugged at collars that suddenly felt too tight. We were supposed to look dignified. Instead, we looked like what we were: kids playing dress-up in a tragedy.

The principal droned on about resilience and the future, words that meant nothing to half of us, who had no future beyond the next

checkpoint. Still, when they called my name, my chest tightened. For a stupid second, it almost felt real, as if this piece of paper might matter somewhere beyond Gaza's walls.

Then I saw Issa's mother filming him with her iPhone, her designer clothes fluttering in the wind. His little sister waved a German flag someone had printed off the internet.

Khalid's seat was empty.

My father beamed, dressed in his best suit, his only one. It was strange to see him not in his fishing gear. He had shaved but kept a tidy beard and mustache. I hadn't realized how handsome my father was.

He enveloped me in a tight hug, telling me how proud he was, with tears glistening in his eyes.

Next to him, my mother stood wringing her hands, waiting for me to give her my attention.

I gave her a questioning look.

"Um Ali is looking after Amina."

"Why didn't you bring her?" I couldn't hide my disappointment. Amina should've been there, not hidden as an afterthought because of her disability.

I could never understand why someone with a disability was 'less than,' given how many had been injured and amputees because of the ongoing Israeli slaughter. Why was she treated differently because she was born that way? But that wasn't the time to have that fight with my parents.

My mother wrapped her arms around me. "We are so proud of you, Emad."

She held my hand, slipping a crumpled money note into it. "Go have fun."

Although I was invited to Issa's house, I wanted to go home first to Amina. Issa's party would have real champagne smuggled through the tunnels. Mine would be tea brewed from reused leaves, sipped under a jasmine vine that remembered better days.

We walked to our house, greeted by neighbors with shouts of "Mabrook."

My parents received the congratulations with beaming smiles and bestowed God's grace in response.

Mixed emotions filled me with bittersweet anticipation. Could I attend college and earn my engineering degree? Would I end up on a boat, drifting day to day, chasing fish?

Leaving Gaza would at best be a daydream. Even if I could, where would I go? Where would I find the funds for travel and school?

I ran the last few blocks home and dashed through the gate. Amina sat under the jasmine and grapevine covering the entrance to our house. Her eyes lit up when she saw me.

I removed my gown and wrapped it around Amina, then placed the cap on her head. She giggled as if she understood its meaning, which was enough for me.

My father and mother arrived a few minutes later.

My mother served tea with sweets to celebrate. "Go to Issa's."

I stared at the money my mother had given me earlier, maybe enough for a beachside snack, then at Amina's grin.

The numbers always came easily to me: 37 graduates at Issa's villa. 12 UNRWA students who'd never get permits. Three friends had already drifted apart. And one sister who saw my worth without a degree.

The gown slipped from Amina's shoulders as she reached for me. I caught her hands instead, twirling her wheelchair until we both laughed hard enough to forget the smell of smoke clinging to our graduation clothes.

The air in Issa's house clung to my skin of perfume and frying oil, the scent of money burning. A generator hummed in the corner, powering fans that stirred the heavy air.

The fridge was stocked with contraband soda, each can worth half a week's wages at the market. I rolled mine between my palms, feeling the condensation drip onto my borrowed dress shoes.

"To Berlin!" Mazen shouted, cracking open a can. The foam spilled over his fingers.

Issa laughed, but his eyes darted to the window. We all heard it: the distant thud of artillery, the soundtrack of every celebration here. His mother flinched.

Did they throw parties in Germany where the only explosions were fireworks? I wondered.

Close to midnight, Issa's father approached us, loosening his tie. We were discussing college applications.

"Three of Issa's classmates could apply," he said, like he was offering charity instead of salt in a wound.

Mazen's smile turned sharp. "Yeah? Which border should we cross to get to the interview? The one with the snipers or the one with the tanks?"

The room went quiet.

Issa's father sighed, like Mazen was a misbehaving child and not a teenager who'd spent his life dodging bombs. "There are always ways—"

"For you," Mazen spat.

Issa stood abruptly, and his chair screeched as he did. "Enough."

The tension became suffocating, and I urged Mazen and Khalid to leave before punches were thrown.

A crowd had gathered, the boys in suits and ties as if attending a conference. I didn't know any of them. We didn't travel in the same circles. At that moment, I realized no matter our common situation, we were not the same.

We left after that, and ended up where we always did: the shore, where the sea swallowed our shouts and the darkness hid our faces.

Mazen chucked rocks into the waves. "Fuck him."

"He didn't mean it like that," I said, but the words tasted like lies.

Issa joined us half an hour later.

Khalid lit a cigarette. The ember glowed between us, a tiny, furious star.

"You think I don't know how lucky I am?" Issa said.

Mazen didn't answer.

We all knew. Luck was a currency here, and Issa had stolen enough to buy his way out. That didn't make him a traitor. It just made him alive.

Issa left at dawn. There were no speeches and no tears, just a handshake that lingered too long. “You’ll get out too,” he said.

I nodded, though neither of us believed it.

Mazen didn’t say goodbye, and neither did Khalid.

That night, I had a dream about Berlin. In the dream, Issa was laughing in a café, sunlight glinting off his espresso cup. Then the café became our old classroom, the espresso turned to dust, and Issa’s face melted into Khalid’s—then Mazen’s—then mine.

I woke up choking on air.

Outside, the drones circled.

Here was what no one told you about graduation in Gaza:

It wasn’t an ending.

It wasn’t a beginning.

It was just another day you survived.

28 — South Toward the Unforgiving Sun

"We die without leaving, so teach our names to the dust."
— Najwan Darwish

Now…

I hesitated, the weight of Khan Younis pressing against my ribs like a second skin. Leaving meant abandoning Amina's unmarked grave, the ghost of her laughter still tangled in the rubble. And Karma…

"Yamma," I said. "Let me find us water."

Mother sat slumped in the sand, her once-vibrant floral dress now a faded shroud draped over bony shoulders. She nodded absently, her chapped lips pressed into a thin line.

I was parched, my tongue thick and sticky, but the thirst clawing at my throat wasn't just for water. I needed to find Karma before the South swallowed us whole.

I still hadn't seen or heard from Mazen, and no one seemed to know who he was or where he was; there were tens of thousands of us crammed into a tent city.

Finding water was a challenge, and I tackled that one first. My mother had lost so much weight, and adding to dehydration and hunger would be a death sentence.

The Red Crescent clinic was my only option, as no water trucks were permitted into our area, nor were food trucks. I had no money and would rely on someone's pity to get a bottle or a cup. My pride long gone, I trekked forward.

I didn't recall when begging became part of my vocabulary. Although we lived on modest means before, we never needed anyone's grace to get by.

On my way, I found a broken gray ceramic bowl, its edges jagged, but its belly intact. I scooped it up, wiping away the dust and something

darker, perhaps old food stains or blood; I didn't care. The rough clay snagged on my calloused fingers as I scrubbed it with my shirt hem.

When I arrived, a crowd had gathered around a water truck that somehow had made it through. We didn't ask; we didn't care to know, just that we had it, and there was enough.

Waiting for my turn stole every moment I would've had to find Karma, but I forced myself to set those feelings aside.

The aid worker's eyes flicked to the small container, "Next."

I opened my mouth, but a commotion erupted behind us. Shouting, then the wet slap of flesh hitting pavement. Someone had jumped the line. The aid worker rushed off, leaving the spigot unattended.

I drank straight from the tap like an animal, water sluicing down my chin, soaking my shirt. Guilt rose with each greedy swallow. But survival had whittled me down to instinct: Drink now. Apologize never.

When I finally filled the bowl and returned to my mother, she had dozed off with her head resting on what was left of the concrete blocks of someone's house. Her breath whistled faintly through parted lips.

I set the container beside her, not wanting to wake her up. It would buy me a few precious moments to accomplish my mission.

For a moment, I watched the rise and fall of her chest. Then I turned, slipping into the chaos toward Karma, toward answers, toward whatever fragments of a friendship remained.

I followed small impressions in the wet sand and found her at the shore, scrubbing clothes on a rock, rinsing them in the sea, then in a bucket of fresh water that I had no idea how she got.

When she lifted her face to meet my gaze, tears glistened in her eyes. Gone was the confident, self-assured, outspoken Karma of university days.

We didn't speak of the bomb landing on our tents nor of the fire that took Amina. We sat in stillness, alternating between staring at the waves and each other as Karma wiped an errant tear from her cheek.

I broke the silence a while later, as it was my last chance to speak with Karma before leaving.

"My mother wants to go to the south."

Karma's eyes transmitted something I couldn't read, and I waited for her reaction.

She finally gave one nod, perhaps of understanding but not acceptance.

"I still haven't found Mazen," I said.

Karma was mute, only shaking her head or nodding as I rambled on, hoping for her to say something… anything.

"I don't want to lose our connection," I admitted. "I've lost too much already."

Her lips parted, and a derisive laugh escaped. "You think you're the only one?"

"That's not what I meant," I said defensively.

"I know what you meant," Karma said.

She wrung out a shirt with more force than necessary. "But connections aren't lost, Emad. They're burned. Or buried. Or left behind in the rubble."

A seagull cried overhead, the sound too sharp, too alive for this graveyard of a beach.

The waves lapped at our silence.

I picked up a stone, smooth from the sea's relentless grinding, and turned it over in my palm. "Will you come south?"

Karma's hands stilled in the water. For a heartbeat, I saw the girl who'd mocked me in an engineering class. Then she exhaled, and she was just another survivor again.

"To Rafah?" She barked another brittle laugh. "To more tents? More queues for food that never comes?"

A drop fell into the bucket—tears or seawater, I couldn't tell.

"No. I'm done running," she said with finality.

The admission hung between us. I wanted to argue, to grab her shoulders and shake her until the old Karma came back. But the woman before me was carved from a different stone, now with sharp edges and fractures.

"Then help me find Mazen," I pleaded. "One last search. Before I—"

"You won't find him." Her words landed like a coffin's lid. "Not unless you're looking in the martyrs' lists."

The stone slipped from my fingers. It hit the wet sand, and whatever sound it made was swallowed by the tide.

Karma finally looked at me, really looked, and what I saw in her eyes wasn't grief. It was envy. "Go south, Emad. Play the good son. But don't pretend any of us are coming with you."

She stood abruptly, water sluicing from the dress, clenched in her fists. For a wild moment, I thought she might hurl it into the sea. Instead, she turned away, shoulders rigid.

"Karma—"

"The water truck leaves in twenty minutes," she interrupted. "Your mother will need more than that broken bowl to survive Rafah."

I opened my mouth, but the words turned to ash. What was left to say? That I'd remember her? That we'd meet again? Lies tasted fouler than hunger now.

She smiled then said, "I'm already dead, Emad. They just haven't stopped shooting the corpse yet."

The truth between us no longer fit words. So I pressed my forehead to hers for one final, silent confession.

Behind me, the waves kept erasing our footprints as if we'd never been there at all.

So I did the only true thing left to do. I walked away.

I took my mother's hand. It was cold, but it held mine tightly. Together, we walked… south… toward Rafah. A nine-mile trek through war-scarred landscapes — crushed buildings, the stench of sewage, and the metallic tang of bomb residue.

Israeli checkpoints loomed like predators. Soldiers barked orders through megaphones, rifles slung lazily over their shoulders. My mother produced papers from her bosom to be checked. One wrong move, one nervous glance, and you're pulled aside.

I marveled at my mother's resourcefulness. I hadn't thought of anything beyond my immediate needs, and here she was, despite the

trauma and grief, forging ahead, needing documents safely tucked in her clothing.

The main roads were often closed or bombed out, forcing families to weave through rubble, dragging sacks of meager belongings. Mother and I had only the clothes on our backs.

Drones constantly buzzed like flies over rotting fruit.

We had to stop often to rest, weakened by hunger and thirst, and the threat of a drone striking us dead.

We arrived in Rafah many hours later. I lost track of the count.

A sea of tents stretched to the horizon, a makeshift city of despair. The air was thick with the smell of sweat, burning plastic, and the occasional whiff of bread from aid kitchens.

Tents were crammed so close together that arguments erupted over inches of ground. Children darted between the flaps, their laughter sharp against the backdrop of hunger.

The Egyptian border loomed just beyond the camp—tauntingly close, impossibly far. The wall was scarred with bullet holes and graffiti: "We will return."

Three square yards of patchwork, plastic, and frayed blankets, held up by sticks and hope, was our new 'home.' When it rained, the ground turned to mud, and everything smelled like wet despair.

Voices carried, fights erupted, and at night, the cries of children and murmurs of prayers blended into a single, endless hymn of exhaustion.

Scorpions and rats were unwelcome roommates. We learned to shake out our shoes every morning.

But here, there was a bit more… food, water, and hope, at least until we were sealed shut from humanity again.

But even that wasn't enough.

At dawn, the bread line started before sunrise, and some days, there wasn't enough.

By noon, I squatted with the men, listening to them trade rumors.

"The border will open next week."

"Aid trucks are coming."

"A Gaza Flotilla will break the siege."

The Elderly sat silently, their eyes hollow. They'd survived 1948, 1967, and now this. Their stories were etched in the lines of their faces.

Nearby, children played games with bullet casings. They'd forgotten what a real school looked like, and young men paced like caged animals. Some whispered about joining the resistance. Others stared at the border, calculating risks.

Women boiled water on makeshift stoves, stretching one chicken bone into broth for ten. My mother joined the fray.

A neighbor's sickness was our sickness. A stolen blanket was a death sentence in winter.

We shared or starved.

We no longer said, "Tomorrow." Only "Inshallah" — if God willed.

Grief was a luxury. We mourned quickly, in stolen moments, and then kept moving. My mother did the same after my father died, and now after Amina.

I boiled with rage, ignoring the fifth step of grief. I bypassed denial — how could I deny what was before me? — and got stuck in anger.

It wouldn't shift from there. There would never be "if only I had done this or not done that…" That option was stripped away by bombs that didn't differentiate.

I would also skip the bargaining stage. There was no one to bargain with… There was no god nor humanity outside of our immediate tragedy. The world didn't care.

Yes, I saw on Facebook and TikTok the hundreds of thousands of voices decrying our fate; the genocide committed against us, but those with money and power who called the shots didn't care.

We would not see justice.

As for acceptance, that was a brutal truth to face. I acknowledged that tens of thousands had been killed, including my father, Amina, and probably Mazen. I refused to accept that their deaths were anything but murder, and my anger intensified tenfold.

29 — The Line in the Water

"The Palestinian is tied to the land like a child to its mother's breast—even when the milk runs dry, the child does not let go."
— Mourid Barghouti

Then…

The engine sputtered as my father guided our weathered fishing boat through the predawn fog. The Mediterranean stretched before us, dark and restless.

I tightened my grip on the net, my calloused fingers tracing the frayed edges. Another day, another gamble with the sea and the soldiers on my last day before school started.

"Stay close to the line," my father muttered.

The six-mile limit loomed in my mind like an invisible wall. Beyond it lay schools of sardines and mackerel, enough to feed a family for weeks. But beyond it also lay the gunships, their searchlights cutting through the night like prison strobes.

The first hint of sun bled into the horizon as we cast our net. The boat rocked with a familiar rhythm.

My father's hands moved with the precision of four decades at sea, though now they trembled slightly with age, or fear, I wasn't sure.

"Remember when we could go all the way to the deep waters?" my father said suddenly, squinting at the haze. "The old generation used to tell stories of nets so full, they nearly capsized the boat."

I forced a smile. I'd heard the stories a thousand times. Back when Gaza's fishermen could sail twenty miles out, back before the blockade, before the wars. Now, even the fish seemed to know better than to linger near shore.

A sharp crack echoed over the waves.

My spine stiffened. It was gunfire.

"Drop down!" my father hissed.

We lay flat as a spotlight swept over us, and the distant silhouette of an Israeli patrol boat cut through the mist.

"We're inside the zone!" I whispered fiercely.

"Since when does that matter?" My father's words were bitter.

The spotlight lingered, then flicked away. The patrol boat moved on, but the tension didn't.

I exhaled, my pulse hammering. This was our every morning dance with the same fear and the same relief.

By sunrise, our nets held only a handful of tiny, silver flickers in the dawn light, barely enough fish to cover the fuel.

"We'll try again tonight," my father said, but the defeat in his voice was heavier than the empty nets.

As we turned toward the port, I gazed out at the horizon where the sea met the sky. Beyond that line, the fish swam free. And here we were, stuck between the guns and the shore, between the past and a future that seemed smaller every day.

I watched my father; he hadn't slowed his pace, but the years in the sun had carved deep grooves into his face.

Sadness overwhelmed me, along with guilt that he would age before my eyes, weathered by the harsh sun and sea salt, all to save enough money to send me to college. For a moment, I resented our life and despised our tormentors more than I ever had. But I was taught that these feelings were counterproductive. We were Palestinians, and we would endure hardships and persevere.

So, I pushed my thoughts deep into the recesses of my mind and focused on reaching shore. All the while, I vowed, with every groan of the tired motor, that I would finish my education, find a good-paying job, and ease the financial struggles my parents had endured.

The docks were already crowded when my father and I pulled our boat ashore. Fishermen shouted prices, their voices hoarse from years of salt and smoke. Buyers—mostly vendors and middlemen—picked through the day's catch with sharp eyes, trying to pay as little as possible. Today, there weren't many women buying for their households.

I heaved the plastic crate onto the stone quay, the few fish inside glinting under the sun.

"That's it?" asked Abu Jamal, the fishmonger who had been buying from my father since before I was born.

My father wiped his brow with a handkerchief he pulled out of his back pocket. "The sea is stingy these days."

Abu Jamal sighed, poking at the fish. "Small. Too small. But I'll take them… half price."

I clenched my hands. Half price meant no profit, not even enough to cover the fuel we'd burned.

"They're fresh," I argued. "We barely made it back before the patrols—"

"Emad," my father cut in, shaking his head.

There was no use bargaining. Not when every fisherman here was desperate to sell.

Abu Jamal counted out wrinkled bills, and my father pocketed them without another word.

We secured the boats, checked the nets, and headed home.

The streets smelled of diesel and falafel. Boys darted past with trays of tea, shouting prices to the fishermen returning empty-handed.

I kicked a pebble, my stomach tight with hunger and frustration.

"We should've gone farther out," I muttered.

My father kept walking, his gaze fixed ahead. "And if they'd sunk the boat? Or taken you?"

"Then at least we'd have tried!"

My father suddenly stopped, turning to face me. The lines around his eyes were deeper in the daylight. "You think I don't want to?" he said. "You think I like watching my son starve for a handful of fish?"

Ashamed, I looked away.

We continued walking in silence until a vendor shouted from a stall, selling yesterday's bread at a discount.

My father reached into his pocket and handed me a few coins. "Take this. Get something for your sister."

I held tightly to the ka'ack as we entered our house. The jasmine scent welcomed us home upon our arrival.

Amina shrieked with delight when I approached. She flailed and squealed when I opened the bag and handed her a piece of bread.

My mother, who was sitting on the stoop, slowly rose, her eyes fixed on my father.

Reading her thoughts, he said, “Tomorrow, the sea will be kinder.”

My mother nodded, but her eyes met mine, as if reading the doubt there, too.

She turned and went inside.

I pushed Amina’s chair, following Mother into the kitchen.

My mother lifted a lid to stir the contents of a pot slowly simmering on the burner.

We took turns, my father and I, to wash up and change our clothes, ridding ourselves of the fish smell and disappointment.

After dinner, I walked outside in the cool night’s air, grabbed a wicker chair, and sat facing the black expanse of the sea. The waves murmured against the shore, the same sound I’d fallen asleep to my whole life.

Behind me, the door creaked.

My father emerged with two glasses of tea so sweet it made my teeth ache. He didn’t speak, just stared at the dark water where his father’s generation had fished without fear.

“We go past the line tomorrow,” I said.

He took a slow sip. The cup trembled in his grip, but his voice didn’t. “We bring back enough for your tuition. Or we don’t come back at all.”

The unspoken truth screamed that the risks were worth bullets. Some cages could only be broken from the inside.

In the silence, I made a new vow. I would survive and remember every fish stolen. Every shot fired. Every limit imposed.

And one day, to tear them all down.

30 — Tuition in Fish and Gold

"I will plant my feet here like an olive tree, rooted even as the storm tries to tear me away." — Fadwa Tuqan

Then…

My mother woke me up before dawn.

Fried eggs and za'atar pulled me to the kitchen table.

"Good morning," she said, and I could see the pride in her glistening eyes.

"Big day, today." She carried plates and teacups to the table as she spoke. "You need a healthy meal for the trip."

My father, tall and proud, shaved and dressed in his only suit, entered the kitchen, ready to sacrifice a day fishing to take me to Al-Azhar University to pay the fees.

I didn't dare object and assert my independence. It was a moment he had waited for since my birth. I was his first child, a son, to carry the family into the future.

Mother cleared the table as we sipped the last of the tea.

As we checked our appearance one last time in the cracked hallway mirror, the kitchen looked as if it hadn't been used that morning. I couldn't understand how Mother managed to do all that and still care for Amina.

It was interesting how the lines were drawn between gender responsibilities, but it didn't escape me how much harder it was to do my mother's job than ours, the men in the family.

Although what we did was physically demanding, we returned home, ate, and slept to recover. Mother, however, had a 24/7 job that involved planning meals, caring for my sister, making sure the house was clean, clothes were washed and ironed, and shopping was done. While I admired her ability to handle all of that, I never thought about offering a

hand or providing support beyond thanking her for our meal and clean clothes.

I'd heard of famous Palestinian women from politics to poetry and everything in between, but somehow, none of it showed up in my daily life; whether by choice or tradition, I wasn't sure.

I adjusted my tie in the speckled mirror, struck by the absurdity of it. My father's hands could mend nets in the dark, yet he'd needed three tries to knot this noose of respectability around my neck.

"Let me." Mother appeared behind me, her fingers precise as she straightened the fabric.

Up close, I saw the gray threading through her hijab. Her hands never stopped moving, smoothing my collar, tucking a stray hair, as if she could stitch luck into my skin.

She nodded, approving of what she saw. "Do well," she said. "May God accompany you."

I shook my head at her random invoking of God's name, but thanked her all the same.

"See you later, Um Emad," my father said to Mother.

"Do you have everything?" she asked, meaning the money to pay the fee and my papers to enroll.

My father patted his jacket above the inner pocket, signaling that he had.

The three of us walked out together, inhaling the jasmine blooms and home.

Mother leaned on the iron bar of the gate, watching us with keen, protective eyes as my father hailed a cab.

With a last wave, my father said, "Al Azhar University."

The taxi smelled of cigarettes and the lingering hope of its previous passengers.

Father's knee bounced in a restless rhythm. His fingers kept straying to his pocket, checking the weight of our future.

Through the window, Gaza awakened. Vendors rolled up their shutters, boys on bicycles wove between donkey carts, and the scent of za'atar and baking bread cut through the diesel fumes. For a moment, I

let myself imagine walking these streets as a university man, with books under my arm, my future no longer measured in nets and nautical miles.

Then we passed the harbor, where skeletal boats listed in the shallows.

My father followed my gaze. “You’ll go farther than those boats ever could,” he murmured.

I nodded, but guilt prickled my throat; it was my constant companion. My education was bought with every fish he couldn’t catch, every risk he’d taken sailing past the blockade.

As Al-Azhar’s gates loomed ahead, I memorized the lines on my father’s face, each one a mile marker on a road he’d never travel. Whatever waited beyond these walls, I’d carry him with me.

As fuel.

Al-Azhar’s campus was a burst of green in the concrete city. Some students milled beneath the palm trees, probably here to enroll as well.

My father paid the taxi driver and strode ahead, shoulders squared, as if he belonged here as much as any professor.

The clerk’s eyes flicked to our starched collars before my father slapped the envelope on the counter.

“Engineering,” he announced. The bills inside smelled of diesel and dried mackerel. “My son builds things that can’t be sunk.”

The stamp came down with finality.

This is real, I thought.

My signature wavered from the terrifying arithmetic of escape. Every letter in “Emad Khaddouri” represented a hundred fish my father would never catch, a thousand waves my mother would stare down alone.

Outside, Martyrs’ Square exhaled its usual chaos as a soccer ball bounced off my shin.

“Fisherman’s boy!” a kid jeered. His toes poked through disintegrating sneakers. “You steal that suit from a corpse?”

My father didn’t flinch. “My son’s a university man now,” he said, and kept walking.

But I glanced back. The boys' teasing had died.

Another, barefoot and sunburned, stared at my polished old shoes with something like hunger. I thought of Amina, of my mother's endless labor, of the sea we'd left behind. *Why me*? The question coiled in my chest. *Why not them*?

When we returned home, my mother was scrubbing the stoop, her wedding band gleaming against her red knuckles.

She searched our faces, her whole body a question mark.

"It's done," my father said with a smile.

For the first time, I saw the truth in a look that passed between my parents: my father had braved the sea. My mother braved the silence. And neither would let me shoulder their sacrifice.

That night, I found my father at the kitchen table, mending torn nets. The lamp cast shadows on his hollowed cheeks.

"You should sleep," I said. "We're fishing at dawn."

He shrugged. "The sea won't fill our pockets by itself."

In my room, I kneeled and pulled a tin box from under the bed, my secret stash. A few coins, a penknife, and a postcard of Jerusalem, where olive trees still grew undisturbed, that I'd found in the market. I counted the money. Not enough.

Then I saw it: my mother's gold bracelet, tucked in the corner. Her dowry. The one thing she'd saved. My throat burned. She'd left it here, knowing I'd look.

I could sell the bracelet. Pay back some of the fees.

But my mother's voice echoed in my head, *"Do well."* Not *"Pay us back."*

Some debts weren't meant to be settled with coins.

I woke early. Dressed quietly.

In the kitchen, I left the bracelet on the table with a note:

"I'll study. But I'll also work. We carry this together."

Then I walked to the docks, where the fishermen eyed me with surprise.

"No university today?"

I picked up a net. "Not until afternoon."

My father said nothing. But when he passed me the oars, his calloused hand gripped mine. He nodded, sending a telepathic message of thanks and pride in me.

31 — Stitching the Sky Back Together

"We have on this earth what makes life worth living: the persistence of life." — Mahmoud Darwish

Now…

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get Karma out of my mind. I wondered how she was doing. I never thanked her for taking care of my mother while I was away, nor for her presence when I looked for Amina's remains.

Our circumstances were better in Rafah, though that was a relative term. Would I dare leave my mother again? *The last time…*

I sucked in a breath as I approached yet another soup kitchen, this one employing paid cooks. They even provided water to wash up and clean clothes to wear, complete with vests bearing the charity's logo.

I would have finished school by now and probably be working, designing structures for our community. Maybe I would be married with a baby on the way if the Israelis hadn't destroyed our homes and futures. But here I am, begging for a job, stirring food.

My eyes drifted to my feet in worn-out Adidas that I found discarded by the roadside. I didn't ask who wore them or how they ended up there. That was an emotional luxury I couldn't afford.

The BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement crossed my mind when the shoe's name finally clicked in my head. They use an Israeli manufacturer, Delta Galil, to make their underwear line. The same people bombing us to ruin, and here I was, with their logo mocking me. But until I found a replacement, they were the only barrier between my battered feet and the scorched sand.

I approached the kitchen, towering over children who didn't reach my waist, all clamoring forward, holding out empty containers in hopes

someone would fill them. They all looked like Majeda, the toddler who stole my soul.

When I raised my empty hand, some of the glowers softened as I wasn't a threat to getting a meal.

I pushed my way through the crowd and reached the front, yelling for someone to notice me.

Finally, a man in the back did. "What are you doing here?" he barked as if I had committed a crime by simply existing.

"I need a job."

"As if you're the only one—"

Our eyes met, and at that moment, my knees weakened. Recognition, along with hope, bloomed in my chest as his scowl faded into a thin smile.

He reached over the three-foot barrier and engulfed me in a bear hug, tears streaming down his face.

"I thought you joined the mujahideen," I said, pulling back to look into Khalid's eyes. He had aged a thousand years.

"My mother dragged me by my ear when she found out I was heading out."

I pictured the scene and didn't put it past Um Khalid to have done that. She was a woman of strong will and determination with no limits.

A widow, she raised her only son sewing and doing alterations from her home on a push-pedal Singer, the only sewing machine that worked when there was no electricity.

Khalid wiped his face with the back of his hand, leaving streaks through the dust.

"Come," he said, pulling me behind the barrier where sacks of flour and rice were stacked like sandbags.

The 'storeroom' smelled of yeast and gunpowder.

"You work here now?" I asked, staring at the UN logo stamped on the crates.

He shrugged. "Fifteen hours a day. Three meals a week as payment." He tore a chunk from a stale loaf and handed it to me. "But today, we feast."

The bread tasted like sawdust, but I devoured it.

Khalid watched me eat with the same intensity his mother used to have when she'd measure fabric between her fingers, precisely calculating.

"Your mother still sewing?" I asked.

"Until her fingers bleed." He held up his hands, the nails cracked from hauling sacks. "They cut the textile shipments last month. Now she unravels old dresses to make new ones."

A woman outside shouted for rice. Khalid ignored her. "Tell me about your family."

I hesitated. The truth sat like a stone in my throat: My father was killed. My sister was dead. My mother had long sold her last bracelet to feed us. Instead, I said, "We survive."

Khalid's smile didn't reach his eyes. "Ah, the national pastime."

He led me behind the boiling pot to what he called "the office."

"Wait here."

He returned with a ledger. Names were scribbled in columns, some crossed out. "The employment list," he said. "I'll add you tomorrow."

I traced a smudged line. "What happened to this one?"

"Israeli rocket. Took out half the market last Tuesday." He snapped the book shut. "Don't worry. You'll be at the bottom. New recruits never get dangerous shifts."

The lie hung between us. In Gaza, every shift was dangerous.

He invited me to his mother's tent. The Singer sewing machine was long gone, and Um Khalid sewed by hand.

"Look who crawled out of the rubble!" Um Khalid yanked my ear, then kissed my forehead. Her hands were wrapped in bandages.

She served us lentil soup in chipped bowls. "Eat," she ordered. "Then you'll tell me why a smart boy like you isn't in Egypt studying."

Khalid choked on his water. "Yamma—"

"What? The tunnels still work, don't they?" She stabbed her needle through a pair of trousers. "My cousin's son left last month. Now he's in Istanbul selling phones."

I stared at the soup. The real answer was too heavy to say aloud: Because leaving meant never coming back. Because my mother would rather starve than take the tunnel.

Um Khalid sighed. “Fine. Tomorrow you’ll help me finish these.” She jerked her chin at a pile of UNHCR uniforms. “They pay extra for hidden pockets.”

Khalid groaned. “Mama, he needs real work!”

“Pockets are real work,” she snapped. “Ask the boys smuggling antibiotics.”

Later, Khalid walked me to my tent after I told him what had happened to my family. His mother insisted that I take a bowl of soup to my mother.

I dropped it off, and Khalid and I walked down alleyways near our camp. He lit a smuggled cigarette. “You ever think about joining them?” he asked quietly. “The resistance?”

Gaza’s walls had ears. I thought of my father’s hands, rope-burned from nets. Of a neighbor’s kids’ collection of bullet casings. “Every day,” I admitted. “Then I remember what your mother said when we were twelve.”

Khalid exhaled smoke. “About martyrs?”

“About zippers.” I mimicked her voice. “‘A straight seam saves more lives than a crooked missile.’”

We laughed until our laughter turned to coughing.

Later, Khalid tapped my shoulder. “Bakery shift starts in a few hours. I’d better get back to my mother.”

32 — The Earth Should Tremble

"The Palestinians' secret weapon has always been their ability to endure the unendurable." — Mourid Barghouti.

Now…

Khalid pointed to a vest with "UN" stenciled in peeling paint. "Wear this. They sometimes don't shoot at these."

This charity kitchen was no different from the previous one. We worked in the heat of the day, over roaring fires, listening to the cries of children and elders begging.

I became like a robot, pouring rice and stirring soup until my legs could no longer support me. When I returned to my tent and my mother, I drifted off to sleep amid thunderous bombs, no longer concerned if I woke up.

My mother withered before my eyes, hardly living if that was what our existence was called.

In the mornings, I headed to work, earning a meal but not money to buy anything we needed. We relied solely on the hands extended to us with pity.

One afternoon, while charging my phone, I overheard a quiet conversation that sparked a flicker of life in me.

Their voices cut through the drone static like blades. A cluster of youth argued behind the ration depot. I melted against the corrugated wall, the charging phone burning my thigh.

"Dabke?" Majd's scarred lip curled. He kicked a dented cooking pot, and the clang muted some voices. "You want to twirl like idiots while they level entire bloodlines?"

Hala's UNRWA sweater sleeves were frayed from twisting. "My brother's resistance unit got vaporized last week. They identified him by

his dental records." Her voice cracked. "I'd rather dance on their graves than become one."

Tariq balanced a kitchen knife on his palm, the blade catching the sun. "So we perform for crumbs like trained dogs?"

"Dancing isn't submission," whispered a boy with eyes too old for his face, Yousef. "My grandfather did the sahja at his brother's funeral. Said the stomping drowned out the Zionists' victory songs."

The metal groaned under my shifting weight. Five heads snapped toward me.

"Khalid's kitchen robot." Hala recognized me, her gaze dropping to my food-stained hands. "Come to report us for treason?"

I stepped into the light. "Just wondering who's dumb enough to practice cultural resistance within sniper range."

A stunned beat of silence landed between us.

Then Yousef grinned. "Welcome to the revolution."

Their rehearsal space reeked of burnt plastic and urine. Yousef demonstrated the dal'ona, his calloused feet slapping concrete where a supermarket once stood. "Left, right, STOMP like you're crushing their border fences!"

My body refused to follow the rhythm, and my muscles atrophied from kitchen labor and fear. "What's the point? Our audience is ghosts and surveillance drones."

Hala unwound her keffiyeh, the fabric whispering of lost orchards and fish nets. "When I dance," she said, tying it around her waist. "I'm not a number in some aid database. I'm Hala Awad from Beit Hanoun, who knew every olive tree by name."

Majd watched from the sidelines, fingers twitching near an imaginary trigger. "Trees they bulldozed for settlements."

"We root ourselves in the dance," she countered, stomping hard enough to dislodge rubble. "So they can't erase us."

Later, Tariq confessed between cigarette drags. "Filmed my audition between airstrikes. Berlin Philharmonic's diversity program." He exhaled toward the sea. "They want 'authentic oppressed artistry.'"

I studied the knife he'd used to peel oranges, now glinting on his knee. "Would you come back?"

He didn't answer. We never do.

Khalid found me practicing near the Med tents. "Since when do you care about folk dance?"

"Since the Red Crescent pays in socks and dignity." I wiped sweat, tasting blood from split lips.

He eyed my blistered feet. "You'd look less stupid in socks than in a shroud."

The whistle came at dusk. We hit the ground as the world exploded in fire and screaming. By the time the dust settled, Hala was howling. The sound was primal and outmatched the sirens.

We found Yousef's home pancaked into a mass grave. Majd, the reluctant dancer, unearthed a tiny hand still clutching a decapitated doll. His tears cut tracks through the ash on his face.

That night, Tariq's knife reflected the funeral pyres. "I'm done choosing." He tested the edge with his thumb. "Germany or martyrdom. Who's coming?"

Hala rewrapped her keffiyeh, the fabric now stiff with dried blood. "First, we dance his zaffa. Then we decide."

Majd stood, his shadow monstrous against the burning UN warehouse. "I choose fire."

They turned to me.

In the silence, I heard my mother's last coherent words, "Come home with your soul intact," and felt Yousef's final grip on my shoulder. "Make the earth remember us."

The choice crystallized. It wasn't between resistance and surrender, but between existing and being.

I reached for Hala's keffiyeh.

"Teach me the stomp."

33 — Calculations of Collapse

"The scalpel won't heal the homeland, but it might stitch the wound." — Fadwa Tuqan.

Then…

I was an engineering student at Al-Azhar University, or at least I was supposed to be. My notebooks were filled with partially solved calculations and sketches of structures I'd never build, not here, with the constant power outages and the scarcity of materials.

The university courtyard buzzed with the usual chaos, students debating politics, sharing notes, and scrolling through their phones. I sat on the steps, flipping through my engineering textbook, but my mind wandered to the cracks in the walls of my home. I traced the lines of a diagram, wondering if it was worth learning how to build structures that would inevitably collapse under the next airstrike.

Mazen dropped beside me, tightly clutching his notebook. His face was tense, his usual smirk absent. "You ever think about leaving?" he asked abruptly.

I frowned, caught off guard. "Leaving? Where?"

"Anywhere," Mazen muttered, staring at the horizon. "Somewhere that isn't... this."

I closed his book and studied my friend. "What's going on?"

Mazen hesitated, his fingers drumming against the notebook. "I applied for a scholarship. Turkey. Political science."

The words were unfamiliar.

I blinked, unsure how to respond. "You... applied?"

Mazen nodded, his jaw tight. "I can't keep writing poems about a future that doesn't exist. I need to do something. Learn something. Maybe I can make a difference from the outside."

My chest tightened. “You spent years telling me we had to stay. That this is our home.”

Mazen’s laugh was bitter. “It is. But what good am I here? Writing verses while the walls crumble? I can’t fix this, Emad. Not from here.”

I stared at him, searching for the Mazen I knew, the idealist who quoted Darwish and argued about revolutions. But this Mazen was different. He was worn and fractured. “What about your family?” I asked.

“They want me to go,” Mazen said quietly. “My uncle’s connections got me the application. My mother said it’s better than watching me waste away here.”

My throat burned. “And what if you don’t come back?”

Mazen’s gaze hardened. “Then I’ll make sure the world remembers us.”

The silence between us was suffocating. I wanted to argue, to tell Mazen he was wrong, that leaving was surrender. But deep down, I understood that the weight of survival was crushing, and not everyone could carry it forever.

Mazen stood, brushing dust off his jeans. “You’ll figure it out, Emad. You always do.”

As he walked away, I stared at the notebook Mazen had left behind. The pages were filled with scribbled verses, crossed-out lines, and a single word circled in red: “Freedom.”

Like everyone else, I tried to fit in. I scrolled through TikTok and Instagram, watching students in Cairo, Berlin, and New York laughing in cafés, studying in sleek libraries, living lives that felt like science fiction. So I wore the same jeans, the same graphic tees with obscure band logos, even though I didn’t know the music. I pretended it was my style.

My ‘fitting in’ was forced; I was not a party-goer and only joined Mazen and others, compelled by a pull toward normalcy, but always shadowed by the reality of our living conditions and my sister’s ongoing care.

Mazen played the part better. He quoted Kanafani between cigarette drags, argued about democracy with professors who humored

him only because they recognized the desperation in his voice. He wanted to believe his words could change something.

I envied that delusion.

Then there was Issa, the one who got out. Last we heard, he was in Germany, studying medicine. A real future. No more rationed fuel, no more border checks, no more holding your breath every time a drone passed overhead.

We had lost contact with Issa, but we heard that he was living a life that suited him. I wondered what I would do in his shoes. Would I remain abroad or return to Gaza to help my people?

There was no need to dwell on something that wouldn't be. Philosophical thoughts were rhetorical and without basis in reality. Mazen and I often tossed around those ideas, but in the end, we shook our heads and faced our responsibilities here at home.

Sometimes, I imagined Issa in a pristine white coat, walking hospital corridors where the machines never failed, where patients didn't die because the antibiotics ran out. Did he ever think of us? Of home?

"You think he'll come back?" Mazen asked once.

I shook my head. "Why would he?"

Mazen exhaled smoke. "Duty. Family."

I laughed bitterly. "You think that's enough?"

He didn't answer.

My sister's disabilities were a ticking clock.

I should have been there more. But between classes, the endless blackouts, and the soul-crushing fishing, I was drowning. So I escaped—into equations I'd never use, into Mazen's debates about revolutions that never came.

One night, after another fruitless exam cram session by flashlight, I snapped my textbook shut.

"What's the point?" I muttered.

Mazen looked up from his book. "Of what?"

"Any of it. We're studying for futures we'll never have."

He was quiet for a long moment. Then, murmured, “So what do you want to do instead?”

I didn’t have an answer.

The truth was, I did want to leave. Not like Issa — not forever. Just long enough to breathe. To learn something that wasn’t survival. To come back with skills that could fix things. Who needed engineers in a place with no buildings left to construct?

The borders were sealed. The permits were myths. And even if I got out, who would carry the weight I left behind? My sister’s labored breaths at night, my mother’s trembling hands as she counted out pills, the way my father’s voice had grown quieter with each passing year, as if he were fading into the walls of our home.

Mazen, ever the idealist, still believed in staying. “This is our home,” he’d say. “If we don’t fight for it, who will?”

I wasn’t sure I had any fight left.

One afternoon, after a lecture on structural integrity — ironic, given the cracks in our own university’s walls — Mazen pulled me aside.

“I applied for a scholarship,” he said abruptly. “Turkey. Political science.”

I stared at him. “You’re leaving? What? Political Science? What happened to Kanafani and Darwish?”

“Maybe. If I get it.”

I should have been happy for him. But all I felt was betrayal.

“You spent years telling me we had to stay,” I accused.

He looked away. “People change.”

And just like that, the last person who understood this place and who understood me was slipping through my fingers.

When Mazen left that night, I sat listening to the generators roar. Mazen had an escape. Somewhere beyond the blockade, Issa was stitching wounds in a German hospital, saving lives in a system that worked. Mazen might soon be in Turkey, debating theories in air-conditioned libraries. And I was here, tracing equations for a city that would never be built.

I pulled out my notebook, flipping to a half-finished sketch of a bridge I’d designed in my first year, back when I still believed

infrastructure could outlast war. The calculations were flawless. The reality was impossible.

Below me, the camp stretched in the dark, a patchwork of flickering lights and shadows.

A child laughed in the distance, and for a wild moment, I imagined tearing my textbooks in half, walking to the sea, and swimming until my arms gave out. Screaming until my voice matched the chaos inside me.

But I didn't.

Because this was the real calculation: Gaza didn't need another broken man. It didn't need my rage or my grief. It needed engineers who could fix buildings. It needed sons who stayed.

So I closed the notebook.

In the end, maybe engineering was the right choice after all. Gaza was a broken system — pressure, stress, collapse. I could calculate the exact point of failure.

But knowing didn't mean I could fix it, and that was the cruelest formula of all.

34 — Pockets Over Bullets

"Some resist with stones. Some with poems. Some with bare hands. All of us resist with our breath." — Hayan Charara.

Now…

The resistance fighters' voices faded into the night as I turned to Khalid. Moonlight caught the fresh scar along his jawline: a smuggler's badge of honor. The boy who once swore to die holding a rifle now carried insulin in his mother's hidden pockets.

"What made you change your mind?" I asked.

Khalid exhaled smoke through his nose, the cigarette trembling between fingers that had learned to stitch as well as shoot. "You remember Marwan's funeral?"

I nodded. We'd buried his cousin wrapped in a keffiyeh instead of a shroud. It was the last one in the clinic.

"That night, I stole my first tank of oxygen." His voice dropped, though the drones already knew all our secrets. "Carried it through the sewage tunnels where the rats chew your ankles if you move too slow."

Khalid rubbed a thumb over his mother's stitching along his collar. "The doctor cried when I delivered it. A fighter. A fucking Qassam Brigades commander wept over my contraband."

I studied his face and the new hardness around his eyes, the old softness when he spoke of his mother. The Khalid I knew had measured manhood by the number of empty magazines. Now he counted it in salvaged vials.

"But your mother—"

"Found me cleaning my AK the day the blockade cut her insulin." Khalid ground out the cigarette on his boot sole. "She didn't beg. Just lifted her shirt to show the track marks on her stomach where she'd been

injecting saltwater." His laugh was hollow. "Asked if my bullets could lower blood sugar."

The camp sounds were a mix of hammers on rubble, a child's cough, and the ever-present hum of drones. Nearby, amputees mixed cement with their bare hands, singing as they worked. Resistance work crews. Khalid's other family.

He jerked his chin toward them. "See Abu Ali? Lost both legs in '14. Now he builds wheelchair ramps with rebar from his own bombed house." His voice thickened. "That's the real resistance. Not just dying well. Living spitefully."

I thought of the underground schools, the coded warning apps, the way our people turned every humanitarian shipment into survival and a weapon. The UN flour bags became sandbags, and medical gloves were repurposed as rocket fuse covers.

Khalid suddenly stood, kicking up dust. "Come."

He led me to the skeletal remains of the pediatric wing of Al-Shifa Hospital. Beneath a bullet-riddled mural of Mickey Mouse, he pried up a floor tile with his knife. The hidden compartment smelled of damp earth and desperation.

"Antibiotics," he said, showing me the vacuum-sealed packets. "From Egypt through the tunnels. Enough for fifty kids." Khalid's grin turned savage. "Cost me two teeth and a bribe to Hamas customs."

The chocolate bar appeared from his inner pocket—Swiss, impossibly smooth. "For emergencies," he said, breaking it carefully along the crease. "Mama's blood sugar drops at 3 am. This is her bulletproof vest."

The first bite dissolved on my tongue, bittersweet as our childhood. I remembered us at twelve, daring each other to touch the electric fence near Erez crossing. Now we measured courage in different currencies: Khalid in smuggled medicine, and I in survival.

"They'll name streets after the martyrs," Khalid muttered. "But who'll remember the rats like me who kept the lights on?" He twisted the chocolate's foil wrapper. "Sometimes I miss the gun's weight."

I understood then. His smuggling was covert infiltration. Every insulin vial that slipped past checkpoints was a grenade thrown at their

siege. Khalid had become the most dangerous of all: a man who refused to play his role in either side's story.

We walked back through the camp's labyrinth, past tents where mothers traded jewelry for baby formula and old men played chess with bottle caps.

At the crossroads, Khalid hesitated. Going left toward his mother's tent or right toward the tunnels.

"Tomorrow," he said, squeezing my shoulder. "I teach you to sew."

Somehow, my mother found Um Khalid while scavenging for blankets, pillows, bowls, and utensils. She had always been resourceful and capable, but she stopped caring after we evacuated from our home. Leaving my father had taken a toll on her, and not knowing whether he was dead or alive was agonizing. It was the same for me.

But mother withdrew into herself after Amina died. She rarely spoke, and she was even less likely to leave the tent. So, it was a surprise to find what appeared to be a home.

For almost two years now, she had relied solely on me for everything, but today, she had washed our clothes and hung them on a laundry line stretched diagonally across the tent, sagging under the weight of damp clothes that never thoroughly dried in the salty coastal air.

The tent was a patchwork of UNHCR-issued plastic and scavenged blankets, sagging, but stubbornly. A single oil lamp dangled from the center pole, and the air smelled of damp earth, sweat, and the faint metallic tang of blood from a half-cleaned wound.

A frayed rug, its colors long faded to a dusty brown, covered the uneven ground. In one corner, a stack of thin mattresses was pushed aside to make room for a low wooden crate that served as a table; its surface cluttered with a dented kettle, a half-empty jar of Nescafé, and a notebook filled with smudged Arabic words.

In another corner, there was a pile of belongings. It wasn't quite a home but evidence of one: a folded mat, a chipped teacup with a fading floral pattern, a pair of shoes with soles worn thin from running.

Near the entrance, my mother sat cross-legged, her eyes kept flicking to the tent's flapping doorway, waiting, always waiting, for someone. Perhaps my father.

The tent was a museum of displacement and a record of loss. But it was also an act of rebellion. We refused to disappear. Every patched seam, every carefully rationed candle, and every whispered conversation after curfew said, "We are still here."

"Take your shoes off," she said.

That was more like my mother.

I complied and wiped my feet on a towel with more holes than material at the entrance of the tent.

"Um Khalid needs help," she said.

I didn't ask. I knew. So, I nodded.

While my mother was skilled at many things, I had never seen her sew. She used to take what needed mending to Um Khalid in the past… when we had a home, a neighborhood, and some money.

I raised a quizzical eyebrow, stifling a smirk.

She must have read my expression. "Tomorrow, I learn to sew."

The fleeting happiness I felt from my mother's sudden interest in life quickly vanished when I visualized Um Khalid's bleeding fingers.

35 — Between Drones and Dawn

"The Palestinians' relationship with the past is not nostalgia, it is a confrontation. We do not long for what was, we insist on what remains." — Mourid Barghouti

Now…

Karma's face haunted my dreams. Weeks had bled together since we fled Khan Younis. Was she alive? Does she have enough food?

My fingers tightened around the ladle. I should have asked for her number. Should have risked the rejection. Now the what-ifs gnawed at me like the rats in our flour sacks.

Amid Gaza's devastation, signs of life reappeared in the most unexpected places.

Eqraa Ketabak (Read Your Book) is a small book stall that opened in late April, right in the middle of the destruction in the Nuseirat refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip.

Rows of Arabic and English novels, poetry, philosophy, faith, and self-help books are laid out neatly on makeshift wooden planks on the pavement, their colorful covers defying the gray dust of destruction around them.

Around me, life continued its cruel parody of normalcy. A newborn wailed in Tent C-12. Somewhere, a couple exchanged vows to the soundtrack of circling drones, instead of the traditional *zaghloudeh*. And here I stood, stirring vats of lentils while my mind trekked north through minefields.

Why not me? Don't I deserve to live, too?

Just as fast as the thoughts made it to the forefront, I berated myself for my foolishness. As if! As if she is interested in me.

But I had to find out.

"Either stir or pray over it," Khalid's voice shattered my thoughts.

He leaned against the prep table, cleaning his nails with a knife that had filleted fish and shrapnel wounds.

I hesitated.

Khalid had two moods these days: the smuggler's calculated calm and the old fighter's rage. Today, his eyes held the dangerous glint of amusement.

"I need to go back," I blurted.

His knife stilled. "To?"

"Khan Younis. Just for—"

"Allah's sake." His laughter came sharp and sudden. Tears streaked his sunburned cheeks. "Of all the suicidal—"

He wiped his face, studying me. "You're serious."

The truth sat between us. We both knew what the north had become, a graveyard with checkpoints. But some questions won't unask themselves.

For a moment, I thought he might try to dissuade me from going and refuse to give me a day off. If that happened, I would throw caution to the wind and leave. I had done it before and would do it again, even if the outcome was pointless.

Finally, Khalid laid a hand on my shoulder, forcing me to meet his gaze. "Look, I can't talk you out of going. I won't." He swiveled his head to look around, then asked, "What's your number?"

I gave him my WhatsApp and cell phone number. He lowered his hand to enter the information into his phone.

"When are you leaving?"

"Before dawn."

"What will you tell Um Emad?"

"I'm going early to work…"

Khalid nodded. "Stay in touch."

"If I can."

"Allah, be with you."

Here was another person who never set foot in a mosque, invoking God's name. What desperation did to many as they sought an invisible force, since no one else was helping.

The tent smelled of impending rain, and sleep was a commodity we couldn't afford. The bombs came hard and fast at night, depriving us of whatever little sleep we could catch. We shut our eyes, invoked images of a past we no longer had, and rested between the whizzing of drones and a distant explosion; sometimes, not so distant.

This night was fraught with restlessness and anxiety, mingled with anticipation, as the minutes ticked by, drawing closer to dawn.

I must've slept at some point because I woke up startled by a crowing rooster, which I hadn't heard in a long time.

A rooster crowed again, an absurd sound amidst the rubble. For a delirious moment, I imagined it heralding my fool's errand. Then the scent of baking taboon bread grounded me; even in hell, someone kept traditions alive.

Forcing my eyes open, I squinted against the filtered dawn's light and jerked up to sit.

"It's too early," my mother said.

"Go back to sleep. I'll see you tonight." I delivered my lie like a pro.

I gathered my belongings and looked around. The sadness of Amina's absence from our lives was a secret we kept deep in our hearts. Here, there was no wheelchair acting as a makeshift shelf for our stuff. Here, there was no search for diapers and medicine. Rafah was an escape from our new reality without my sister. Maybe that's why my mother took us south.

My mother lay still on her mat, but the tension in her shoulders betrayed her wakefulness. I knelt beside her, pressing my lips to her work-worn hand, a gesture that meant forgive me before I'd even sinned.

Her fingers twitched. "Come back early."

The words were barely audible, yet they carried the weight of every unsheltered night since Amina's death.

She opened one eye, staring straight at me. "Don't be late."

I froze. *Does she know*? Or was this another of her prophecies, like when she'd wake seconds before the airstrikes?

The camp stirred as I slipped out.

Khalid materialized from the predawn shadows, thrusting a parcel into my hands. “Dates. Water purifiers. And”—he tapped a hidden pocket— “your ‘I’m-not-Hamas’ bribes.”

I nodded, my throat became tight. We knew what went unsaid: if caught, these same items would become “terrorist supplies.”

As I turned north, the first streaks of sunlight painted the destruction in gold. Somewhere beyond the razor wire, Karma might be stirring her pots, might be thinking of me, or she might be bones under concrete.

The gamble wasn’t just about my life. It was about the fragile hope that still flickered in our wasteland, that sometimes, against all odds, people get to choose their madness instead of having it chosen for them.

36 — Olive Oil Soap and Prophecies

"The mother who fears bullets for her son teaches him how to walk between shells." — Palestinian Proverb.

Then…

My mother knew secrets the sea whispered at midnight. She could predict sniper fire by the way birds stopped singing and diagnose pregnancies by how women carried their market bags. Gaza had many names for women like her—haflat (intuitive), mualima (wise woman), sahira (witch), depending on whether her prophecies brought comfort or fear.

I minded my elders, respected others, and was a good son. But I was also a kid who did mischievous things behind my parents' backs. While limited by what a teenager could do in Gaza, Mazen and I found our share of naughtiness.

At fourteen, I learned the price of her sight.

The summer of the Great March protests, when the air smelled of burning tires and teenage rebellion, Mazen and I snuck out to watch men weld scrap metal into protest art. We returned past curfew, shirts reeking of smoke, hearts pounding with stolen freedom.

Mama stood in the doorway, her silhouette framed by the single bulb we dared to keep lit. Her arms were crossed, nostrils flared as if she could smell the rebellion on me. She didn't need to ask where we'd been, the soot on our collars confessed for us.

"The soldiers shot three boys near Malaka today," she said, scrubbing my collar with olive oil soap. "You think bullets know you're just playing revolutionary?"

I opened my mouth to lie, but she pressed a thumb to my lips. "The drone parts. Bring them home by maghrib."

My blood turned to ice.

We'd found the drone parts behind the UNRWA school, its wings snapped like a wounded bird. Khalid, who'd been tinkering with electronics since we were kids, pried open its belly with a screwdriver.

"Look at this!" He held up a circuit board studded with chips. "We could build our own radio with these. Something the Fatah guys can't monitor."

We stored the Israeli surveillance drone components in a gutted refrigerator. Yet Mama already knew.

I stared at her in disbelief.

"Abu Ali saw you digging through trash like stray dogs," she said without looking up. "The Izz ad-Din boys pay 50 shekels for these. You want them knocking on our door?"

My throat went dry. She'd washed my stash in vinegar; her way of erasing fingerprints.

"Go change. Your father's taking these to the sea tonight."

Her predictions weren't always so grim. She woke me at 3:17 a.m. once, dragging my mattress from beneath the window. The bullet came at 4:02, punching through concrete where my head had lain. She brewed thyme tea for Mrs. Haddad three days before the midwife confirmed her pregnancy.

"How do you know these things?" I asked as we picked wild za'atar in the cemetery, the only green space left in our neighborhood.

She snapped a stem between her fingers. "When you've buried as many children as I have, the world whispers warnings."

A flock of drones passed overhead. Mama didn't flinch.

The recruiters came for us at fifteen, dangling candy and threats in equal measure. Khalid swaggered forward when they cornered us after prayers; Mazen and I hung back, suddenly "needed" at home. Through our bullet-pocked window, I watched Khalid march away in new black boots, his shoulders squared for war.

That night, Mama served my favorite molokhia stew. I knew it was a bribe.

"The Qassam Brigades lost six boys in a tunnel last week," she remarked, ladling extra sauce onto my rice. "Their mothers still don't have bodies to bury."

Three days later, when the recruiter returned, Khalid went with him. Mazen and I stayed home, and suddenly, we were "needed" to help Baba repair our fishing nets.

Through the window, I watched Khalid stride away in his new black boots, his shoulders squared like a man's.

Mama handed me a nail. "Hamdulillah, your friend is brave. You're smarter."

When Israel jammed Gaza's networks for seventy-eight days in 2018, Mama became our human internet, relaying engagement announcements through bread deliveries.

Mazen and I ran messages between sweethearts. They were folded notes tucked into empty cigarette packs, passed through the hands of tea boys and midwives. We coded gossip into soccer chants, hid love letters inside hollowed-out eggplants at the market.

Mama caught me with a stack of letters bound in hair ribbons.

"Fatima's daughter is engaged to her cousin in Rafah," she said, thumbing through them. "Burn the pink one. That's the mayor's niece."

She was right.

Two weeks later, the mayor's men broke a boy's fingers for writing poetry to her.

The night before my high school finals, Mama woke me with a cup of tea. "You'll pass math but fail chemistry unless you study the blue notebook now."

I laughed. Chemistry was one of my best subjects.

The next morning, the exam had three questions from Mazen's stolen university prep book — the blue one I'd barely glanced at.

When I scraped by with a passing grade, Mama shrugged. "I said you'd fail, not that you couldn't cheat fate."

By 2019, even witch-mothers couldn't stop the collapse. When the banks ran out of cash, we traded in whispers: who had insulin, which baker still had yeast, and where to find the underground charging stations.

Mama turned her sixth sense into a business, reading fortunes in coffee grounds for families searching for missing sons.

"Your brother is alive in Hadarim prison," she told Um Youssef, pressing a clove of garlic into her palm. "Plant this. When it sprouts, he'll call."

The clove rotted in its soil. The Red Cross letter came anyway.

That night, I found Mama scrubbing her hands raw at the sink.

"Sometimes," she said, "the world lies to me too."

"Yamma, how do you know so much?"

She looked at me over her shoulder, a glint of something mischievous in her expression. "Don't be late," she said.

I turned to leave but froze, one foot not quite back on the floor, when she said, "The cigarettes cost money. You need it for your education."

The night before the evacuation order, she packed our documents in a biscuit tin, wrapped Amina's medicine in cloth diapers, and tucked my father's fishing license inside her bra. "We leave at dawn," she said, as if reading the invasion from tea leaves.

I should have known then that real witches didn't predict the future. They survived it.

37 — The Wind That Refused to Forget

"We are a people who live on wind and make bread from dust."
— Fadwa Tuqan

Now…

Murmurs from tents let me know the camp was waking up after another restless night of bombardment. I headed north, back to Khan Younis, after charging my phone.

My mind wandered as my slippers stirred dirt with every step. The eight miles ahead seemed endless in this vast expanse of destruction, and barely a soul was in sight.

Ahead, a lone figure emerged from the haze of dust. An old man was dragging a cart loaded with salvaged rebar. His hands were wrapped in strips of cloth, his shoulders hunched under the weight.

We exchanged nods as we passed, the unspoken language of those who no longer had the energy for words.

I thought of my father then, how he would have whistled through his teeth at the sight of such stubbornness.

"Look at him," he'd say. "The Zionists take our land, and we rebuild with their scraps."

But there was no rebuilding this. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

A few months ago, in the skeletal shell of what was now our home, my mother balanced a tea kettle over a camp stove flickering in the wind, along with the scent of wild za'atar and lentils we had scavenged from a UN parcel weeks before, rose gently into the fading light.

The memory of my mother's tea kettle haunted me. That stubborn little flame, fighting the wind as if it refused to acknowledge the absurdity of its existence. We'd run out of gas weeks ago, but she'd torn apart an old fan, rigged the motor to a hand-crank, and used the wires to suspend the kettle over a fire made from splintered furniture she'd found.

Now, as I stepped over the skeleton of a crushed bicycle, I wondered what would become of us.

There were no new clothes to sew or sweets to buy in Ramadan 2025. It all felt like a dream now buried beneath dust and grief.

Ramadan came not with cannon fire signaling iftar, but with the thud of bunker busters and the wail of ambulances. Our neighborhood's communal table was a red tarp stretched over corpse-strewn pavement as neighbors set out chipped plates and dented pots along its length. No mahshi or qatayef, just canned beans, a few shriveled cucumbers, and cornmeal bread ground between bricks, its grittiness lingering on the tongue like unspoken grief.

Yet we gathered.

And each night, kids lit paper lanterns they'd made from scraps of a school notebook and foil from a candy wrapper, and placed them near the family's spot on the tarp, where a little one would point and say, "It's brighter than the sky."

Mosques were gone, their crushed domes and shattered minarets lay like lost souls, but faith had found new homes in alleyways and open courtyards.

On the 27th night of Ramadan, my mother and the other women gathered for taraweeh prayers between two bombed-out apartment buildings. They laid rugs next to a cracked water tank and raised their palms to a sky that only had drones instead of stars.

Eid morning arrived gray and silent. I wore the same patched-up shirt twice, and Amina's sock doll sat propped against our makeshift tent, its button eyes staring blankly at the sky. My mother had named it "Yara" after her best friend's daughter, who had vanished under the rubble of her home in December.

At the prayer site, where the dust swirled like ghosts, I watched a man break a single date into four pieces and pass them to the children nearby. They accepted it with solemn reverence, as if it were a feast.

We joined others in a cleared lot where men led the Eid prayer.

Dust swirled in the wind like incense, and mothers wept quietly during the sermon for children who should have been there in new clothes, chasing balloons.

Yet after prayer, someone passed a pot of sweetened rice. Another shared date fruit that had been saved since the first day of Ramadan.

Later, as the sun rose higher, I saw a boy no older than seven, tugging at a string tied to a plastic bag. The bag fluttered in the wind, a sad imitation of the kites we used to fly before the siege.

"What's its name?" I asked.

He looked at me with a puzzled expression. "It's not a bird. It's just a bag."

"Then why fly it?"

He shrugged. "So I don't forget how."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a folded UNRWA worksheet, half a math problem still visible in a smudged pencil. "Here. Tape this to the string. It'll catch the wind better."

He stared at the paper as if it were gold. Then, with sudden fierceness, he said, "Next Eid, I'll make a real one. With colors."

I nodded. "Insha'Allah."

The words sounded just like my mother's.

I finally reached Khan Younis; its streets were a graveyard of concrete and twisted metal, disorienting and surreal.

Then, I saw it.

Our red tarp, frayed and sun-bleached, still clinging to the skeletal remains of two walls. Beneath it, a woman stirred a pot of rice with slow, deliberate movements, as if each rotation of the spoon were a prayer.

Her children sat nearby, rolling pebbles between their fingers, their game silent.

I hesitated. Should I speak? Offer help? But her eyes flicked up to mine just once, before dropping back to the pot. A stranger's gaze, heavy with exhaustion and something worse: the understanding that no words could bridge this kind of loss.

So I walked on, my throat tight.

Karma's tent. Where would it be now?

I counted steps in my head, retracing a path that no longer existed. Past the husk of Abu Ali's grocery. Past the crater where the mosque's minaret had once pointed toward heaven.

A wet and rattling cough drew my attention.

I turned.

An old man hunched in the shadow of a collapsed balcony, his hands shaking as he tried to light a cigarette with a broken lighter. Our eyes met.

"You're back," he said, as if I'd only been gone an afternoon.

My pulse jumped. "You remember me?"

He exhaled smoke. "I remember everyone who leaves." His voice was a dry rasp.

"She's not here," he muttered.

The words hit like a punch to the chest. "Karma?"

He gestured vaguely west. "Gone before the tanks came. Smart girl."

Gone. The word echoed, hollow. *Gone where*? *Gone how*?

But the old man just tapped his temple.

Confused, I stood there, staring at him. There was no way he would've known. He had to be going mad.

"Mama says the rice is ready," a child behind me said.

I turned.

The woman beneath the tarp was holding out a chipped bowl. Her eyes didn't meet mine, but the offering was clear.

Eat. Remember. Keep going.

I took it. The rice was salty, with too much broth and not enough grain. The best thing I'd ever tasted.

38 — The Engineering of Mercy

"In Gaza, we learn to treat the wounded with thread and patience." — Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish

Now…

The ruins of Khan Younis greeted me like a gutted beast. Where our tent had once stood, a crater yawned wide enough to swallow three cars. I stood too close to the edge, sending pebbles skittering into the void where our life had been.

Then it hit me: the scent of mana'eesh. Za'atar and olive oil cut through the stench of rubble. My stomach clenched with hunger and grief. *What am I doing here*?

The old man's words echoed in my head. *"Gone before the tanks came. Smart girl."*

I turned to leave when footprints in the ash caught my eye, leading to a lean-to of refrigerator doors and bullet-riddled UNRWA tarps. Inside, a woman knelt by a whistling kettle, its two-note song identical to my mother's lullaby.

"Karma?" I said, unsure.

Her shoulders stiffened. "Took you long enough." The words were ice, but her hands trembled as she poured tea.

The old man was wrong. I was glad I hadn't listened to him. I shouldn't have left in the first place. I had been torn between my mother and my heart, and I followed the only woman who ever mattered, my mother. I was all she had.

When Karma finally faced me, I barely recognized her. A scar ran across her left eyebrow, still pink and fresh. But her hands moved with the same precise fury as she poured tea into a tin cup.

She pointed to the crate a few feet away, and I fumbled in my pocket for the pills Khalid had given me and handed them to her.

Karma palmed them without thanks and tossed them into a mortar with dried thyme.

She ground the mixture with more force than necessary.

A child's cough rattled from the shadows. My breath caught until I saw the small form cocooned in a man's keffiyeh. A boy, maybe four, his arm splinted with ruler-straight sticks.

Karma followed my gaze. "Ahmad. Orphaned in the last incursion." She jerked her chin toward a pile of textbooks in the corner. "Old math notes saved his bones."

I touched the cracked spine of the university notebook. Someone had crossed out a name and written 'Property of Camp Martyrs' Clinic' in blue ink.

A drone's shadow passed overhead. We froze until the sound faded.

"Why did you come back?" Karma asked at last.

I had no response that didn't sound foolish. That I'd memorized the way her braid curled at the end. I needed to see proof that something good still grew there.

Karma snorted at my silence. "Men. Always staring at ruins like they'll confess secrets."

And there she was, the Karma from long ago who sneered at me and derided me. I realized at that moment, it was the Karma I was in love with.

Ahmad whimpered in his sleep. Karma pressed two fingers to the boy's forehead, checking for a fever. The gesture was so similar to my mother's that my chest ached.

I shuffled from foot to foot.

"Maybe I should…" I trailed, unsure of what to do or say.

"Stay if you want," she said. "But we bury our dead at dawn."

My stomach twisted. "Who's dying?"

Karma's pestle stilled. "Who isn't?"

A gust rattled the tarp.

Ahmad whimpered again, his splinted arm twitching. I watched Karma's shoulders tense with the exhaustion of someone who'd spent too many nights choosing who got the last dose.

I reached for the mortar. "Let me."

Our fingers brushed. Hers were warm, rough with salt and lye from making soap out of bomb debris, as I'd seen many do.

A tremor passed between us, quick as a spark. Then she jerked away.

"Crush it fine," she ordered. "Ahmad screams when it's grainy."

The pills in Karma's mortar weren't aspirin. The morphine's bitter almond scent hit me as I ground the pills. I remembered the field nurse who'd stitched a fighter's leg with fishing line and a needle sterilized in arak, her hands steady while mine shook now.

Now Karma dipped a rag into the tea, sponging Ahmad's face. "His parents were at the Kuwaiti Hospital when it got hit." A muscle jumped in her jaw. "He was playing outside."

I'd seen the footage, where Israeli snipers picked off civilians fleeing through the smoke. My fingers tightened around the pestle.

Karma snatched it back. "Easy. That's all we have."

Outside, voices argued. A man shouted about stolen rations. Then some glass shattered.

Karma didn't flinch. "They'll calm down by maghrib."

"How do you know?"

She nodded to Ahmad's splint. "Because I set Abu Fadi's grandson's leg yesterday." She half smiled. "No one touches the doctor's tent."

The word "doctor" hit me like a slap. Karma had been an engineering student like me.

As if reading my mind, she jerked her chin toward the corner. Beneath a stack of bloodstained gauze, I spotted a familiar, old, blue engineering sketchbook. Karma had drawn over them, transforming my bridge designs into anatomical diagrams.

A scream pierced the air. Karma moved before I could react, snatching up a bottle of homemade antiseptic (olive oil and garlic, I'd later learned).

"Coming?" she threw over her shoulder.

I followed her into the dusk.

The scream came from a collapsed bakery. Inside, a boy no older than twelve lay pinned under an oven, his left leg twisted at a sickening angle. Blood pooled dark beneath him, already thick with flies.

"Pressure here," Karma ordered, slapping my hand onto a wad of fabric over the boy's thigh.

The heat of his blood seeped through instantly.

She wedged a crowbar under the oven. "On three."

The metal groaned as we lifted. The boy shrieked with a sound that scraped my bones raw. Then he fell terrifyingly silent.

Karma didn't pause. She tore open a suture kit made from a fishhook and unraveled nylon fishing line. "Hold his skin together."

My fingers slipped on the boy's clammy flesh as my stomach roiled. "He needs a hospital—"

"He needs to not bleed out in a bombed-out bakery."

Karma's needle pierced skin. "Talk to him," she commanded.

The boy's name was Tariq. He'd been searching for yeast when the wall collapsed.

As Karma stitched, I told him about the sea and how the waves turned silver at dawn, how his uncle's boat would be waiting when he healed.

I wasn't sure if he could hear me, but I kept talking. Perhaps more to calm my rattled nerves and distract me from throwing up than to calm the young boy.

Karma tied off the last stitch.

We carried Tariq back through alleys stinking of sewage and rotting wheat. Shadows moved at the edges of my vision — people watching, waiting.

A gaunt man blocked our path. "They say the doctor has morphine."

Karma adjusted Tariq's weight. "They lie."

The man pulled a knife. "My wife—"

"I know." Karma's voice cracked. "But this child lives today, so yours might tomorrow."

She showed him the empty morphine tin tucked in her waistband. It was a gamble.

The man spat at our feet but let us pass.

“Where are we taking him?” I asked, looking around.

“He needs rest. I don’t know if he has anyone.”

Back at the tent, we laid Tariq next to Ahmad.

Karma collapsed onto a mat.

Ahmad slept fitfully in the corner. We had left him unattended. We had no choice.

“You’re out of morphine,” I realized.

She rubbed her temples. “Out of everything.”

That was when I noticed the marks on the tent pole: notches counting days. The most recent was smeared red.

“Who did you lose?”

Karma unwrapped a blood-caked bandage from her ribs. The wound beneath oozed yellow. “Does it matter?”

I reached for her. She flinched.

“The convoy,” she said abruptly. “Be at the checkpoint by dawn the day after tomorrow.”

That night, I lay on the sand, propping my head with a discarded garment.

I watched the rise and fall of her chest, the protective curl of her body around Ahmad. The woman who’d once derided my sentimentality now clung to hope with both hands. And I realized that I hadn’t come back for answers.

I’d come to remember what it looked like when love refused to die.

39 — UNRWA Blue

"We bury our dreams with our dead, but leave our roots above ground." — Asmaa Azaizeh.

Now…

The phone rang hollow in my ear. Three attempts, three failures to reach Khalid. Each unanswered call carved deeper into my ribs. If the message didn't reach my mother... I crushed the thought like Khalid squashed his cigarette.

Tariq flushed with fever and moaned.

When Karma summoned the girl, no older than twelve, her wrists bird-bone thin beneath the oversized sleeves, I nearly protested. Then I saw the girl's hands. Steady as a nurse while adjusting Tariq's splint.

My privilege tasted like bile.

"She's too young," I muttered.

Karma gave me a sidelong glance which instantly hushed me. That one fleeting moment revealed my unspoken privilege, as if I lived in a castle of abundance.

Outside the tent, the morning haze had already begun to thin, revealing the jagged silhouette of Khan Younis's flattened skyline.

The rising sun cast pale streaks of light across torn tarpaulins and makeshift ropes, the only barriers shielding us from the wind and from whatever came next. The sour tang of unwashed bodies, the acrid sting of last night's shelling still clinging to the air.

Karma rolled her sleeves, revealing a tattoo I'd never seen: "Yaseen 76" in faded ink across her forearm. A verse about patience. A joke from the woman who'd never waited for anything.

"He needs hydration," she muttered, mostly to herself, feeling Tariq's forehead. "We'll have to find something clean."

I didn't ask where she planned to find it. I wasn't ready for the answer.

The young girl she had summoned earlier reappeared, her black headscarf slipping back slightly as she ducked through the flap. She carried a bowl of water, her eyes lowered.

Karma took the bowl and murmured something in Arabic too soft for me to catch.

The girl's mouth turned slightly, not quite a smile. Then she was gone again, as silent as she'd come.

"Tariq's lucky," Karma said, placing a wet cloth against his forehead. "That girl's steadier than half the paramedics I trained with."

I sat across from her, knees aching from the cold floor. "Trained where?"

She hesitated for a heartbeat, then shrugged. "At the clinic. I had to do something."

That was the most I'd ever heard her share.

Somewhere nearby, a baby wailed, a thin, high cry that rose above the din of distant drones; the morning had begun in full force.

Around us, the tent city stirred to life: pots clanked, voices murmured in prayer or argument, and chickens flapped somewhere too close for comfort. The air smelled of damp earth, diesel fuel, and desperation.

Karma covered Tariq with another blanket and stood.

"We should go," she said. "The aid trucks won't wait."

I didn't move. "I can't leave him here."

"You must. If we don't get those supplies, he won't make it. None of us will."

I bent and brushed a damp curl from Tariq's temple. His skin burned under my fingertips. There was nothing I could give him here, not medicine, not certainty, not even the comfort of my full attention. Just a hope, handed to a stranger.

Reluctantly, I rose and grabbed my pack. Karma nodded once, approving.

We stepped into the morning light. Dust danced in golden shafts, and the ground was soft with ash and sand.

The girl stood waiting just outside, barefoot, a worn scarf wrapped tightly around her shoulders. Her gaze flicked from me to Karma. Without a word, Karma pressed a small packet of rehydration salts into the girl's hand. The girl nodded and turned back toward the tent.

"She won't fail him," Karma said, almost to herself.

We walked toward the edge of the encampment. The paths were narrow, flanked by makeshift shelters strung together with string and hope.

Eyes watched us through holes in canvas, some curious, others hollowed with resignation.

A young boy ran past us, a chicken under his arm. He seemed about seven years old, and he grinned as if it was just another day in the playground.

"How long have you been doing this?" I asked, stepping carefully to avoid a rusted bucket.

"Too long to keep count," Karma said. "And not long enough to change anything."

There was fatigue in her voice. The kind that settled into your bones when outrage had run dry and all that remained was motion.

Ahead, a line formed, dozens already gathered, clutching ration cards, plastic containers, and old bread bags. The aid trucks hadn't yet arrived, but that didn't stop the waiting. In a place where time had lost its usual shape, people still obeyed its rituals.

A man near the front of the line saw Karma and raised his hand in greeting. His sleeves were torn, his beard dusted with gray, but his smile shone like winter sunlight.

Karma waved back, then turned to me. "When the trucks come," she said, "keep your head down. Don't argue. Take what we're given. We can't afford attention."

I nodded slowly, my heart pounding. This was far from what I had known. I felt like an impostor parachuted into someone else's disaster. And yet, Karma didn't treat me like a burden. She offered no pity, but her expectations were high. There was no room here for sympathy—neither for others nor for myself.

We stood together as the sun climbed higher, casting our shadows long and thin across the sand.

Once we had gathered our allotment, we returned to Karma's tent to store the items.

Karma placed small bags filled with substances into her pocket before Ahmad and I trailed her to the burial site.

The burial trench yawned behind the clinic. Nine UNRWA plastic-wrapped parcels were stacked like firewood. As we lowered the smallest bundle, the sheeting slipped. A child's foot, still wearing one red sneaker. Smaller than Amina's.

My knees buckled.

My throat closed.

She caught my eye across the grave. For a heartbeat, her mask slipped. Then she began reciting Surah Yaseen to ease the soul's journey as the men shoveled dirt onto the plastic.

Ahmad stared up at me, his good arm outstretched. In his palm lay a twisted piece of metal that was part of a drone's propeller.

"For you," he whispered.

The weight of it burned my skin.

Just before we left, A woman clutched Karma's sleeve. "My husband is not ready! He needs washing—"

Karma pried the woman's fingers loose gently. "Fatima, remember what we talked about? The water's contaminated."

She pressed the morphine-laced thyme into the woman's palm. "For the pain."

As we walked back, Karma's steps grew heavier, and her breath came in shallow hitches. When she stumbled, I caught her and felt the fever raging beneath her skin.

She'd been treating everyone but herself.

"You're next," I promised, tightening my grip.

It was the first real thing I'd said since arriving.

The vinegar bit into Karma's cracked knuckles as she scrubbed, the basin water blooming pink like some grotesque flower. I watched the stains

swirl with Tariq's blood, the burial dirt, the invisible weight of all the hands she couldn't save.

"You should leave at first light," she said without turning.

"Why?"

She finally faced me. "Because you still have a mother."

At that moment, I hated how well she knew me. Karma saw the cowardice beneath my courage.

My mother's silent blessing burned in my pocket like a stolen relic.

Karma's voice softened. "Go home, Emad."

I stepped into her space, close enough to see the pulse fluttering at her throat, betraying her steady hands. "What if I don't want to?"

Her breath hitched when I touched the scar. Not the pink ridge above her eyebrow, but the older one, the thin white line along her jaw.

"Stupid," she murmured.

Ahmad's cough shattered the moment. We sprang apart like thieves.

Karma busied herself with bandages. "There's a convoy leaving for Rafah tomorrow. Medical cases only." She wouldn't meet my eyes. "I got Ahmad a spot."

"And you?"

Outside, a drone's whine crescendoed. We didn't flinch. Some silences become a language of their own.

40 — The Weight of Promises

"We suffer from an incurable malady: hope."
— Mahmoud Darwish

Now…

I found Karma at first light, placing a water bottle and a sealed file in Ahmad's satchel.

"You're really sending him alone?"

Her fingers trembled as she tied the wrist tag with her name and the date etched in nail polish. "His aunt will know him by this."

The words sounded rehearsed too many times in the dark.

When I caught her wrist, her pulse fluttered like a trapped bird. For one suspended breath, I saw the truth in her eyes. She wanted to run.

"Come with us."

"Give me your number," she said. "And… Khalid's."

Then she pulled out the phone. "Give me your number. And Khalid's." The cracked screen illuminated streaks of sweat and something shimmering at her lashes. Not tears. Karma never cried.

The drones buzzed overhead, a warning that we didn't have the luxury of time.

Karma moved faster than thought, shoving Ahmad into my arms with a force that bruised. "Run."

One word that held every goodbye she'd never say.

The first blast lifted us off our feet. Ahmad's scream pierced my eardrums as we crashed into dirt.

When I turned, the clinic was simply...gone. No fire. No rubble. Just a gaping maw where hope had been.

Then, another blast took out the doctor's tent along with his children and his wife.

Ahmad tore from my grip and screamed Karma's name as I chased him to stop him from going toward the carnage.

His small body thrashed against mine, his screams shredding the morning air. "Karma! KARMA!" His voice cracked with a desperation no child should know.

I locked my arms around him.

The smoke smelled wrong. It was sickly sweet beneath the burning plastic, like caramelized flesh.

I gagged, pressing Ahmad's face away from the carnage.

"Look." I pointed to the swallows darting through the haze. It was a lie as old as war itself.

My mother's voice echoed in my head. *"Look at the birds, habibi, not the blood."*

A whimper escaped his throat. "Karma promised."

I didn't ask what. Some promises were too sacred to voice.

By the time I had coaxed Ahmad to leave, the convoy had left.

My heart tugged at me to return and find Karma, but she wouldn't have survived that blast, and neither would Tariq.

Karma had entrusted me with Ahmad's care, so I turned to him.

"Are you ready, buddy?" I said.

I wouldn't let her down. *I will deliver Ahmad to his aunt*.

The boy looked at me with a sadness that cut through my core and said nothing.

"Yalla," I said, bending to his level. "You're a fierce lion. You and I will make it to Rafah. Climb up."

Ahmad's weight burned through my shoulders as I walked. He hadn't spoken in hours, his breath coming in hot, erratic puffs against my neck.

The drone propeller bit into my palm, its edges drawing blood that mixed with sweat. I welcomed the pain. It anchored me to the moment, to the boy who needed me present.

"You're heavy," I lied when his grip slackened. "Hold tighter."

He obeyed, twisting his fingers in my grip, his broken arm resting on my shoulder.

Good. Fear kept him alive.

The coastal road had become a funeral march. An old woman dragged a suitcase with no wheels, its contents rattling like bones. A teenage boy carried his little sister piggyback, her legs swinging with the eerie lightness of a starving child.

No one looked at each other. Grief was private here.

Ahmad stirred. “Water...”

His first words, hours later, thrilled me. I had to believe he would be okay.

The broken pipe gushed rust-brown liquid that stank of sulfur. He drank from my cupped hands like a feral cat, his lips leaving smudges on my skin.

A shadow fell over us. A man in a faded UN vest eyed Ahmad’s wrist tag. “Convoy leaves in twenty minutes. Medical priority only.”

I stood, wiping the rusty water off my hands, grateful that we had somehow caught up to the medical transport group.

“He has an aunt in Block J. Lina,” I said.

The man nodded, already turning away. Then paused to look at me. “You’re Emad.”

My blood froze. How did he know who I was?

“Khalid’s looking for you.”

I relaxed at the mention of my friend’s name.

Ahmad tugged on my sleeve, shaking his head, returning my attention to him.

“You must go. It is safer with them.”

He shook his head again, vehemently. His eyes begged me not to let him go with strangers.

We had several miles left to get to Rafah, and now, without sustenance, I couldn’t let him stay with me. Whatever little food Karma gave us had long gone, and with nothing in sight, handing Ahmad over to someone who would take him the rest of the way and hopefully feed him was a relief.

Also, part of me wanted to return to Khan Younis. I longed to find out if Karma was okay, but that wasn’t an option as the Israelis were reinvading the city.

“I’ll have to go with him,” I said, pointing at Ahmad.

"We can't do that," the man said. "He goes with us."

Ahmad bolted, and I chased him, yelling for him to stop and that I wouldn't leave him.

Warily, he slowed and looked over his shoulder, assessing my truth.

I buckled to my knees, rubbing my hands over my face. "We don't have food or water." I almost cried with desperation.

Ahmad slowly approached and placed his good arm around my shoulder. "I promise. I won't get hungry or thirsty," he muttered. "Please let me go with you."

I nodded and stood.

Suddenly, Ahmad took off running toward the man, and another wave of relief washed over me. He had decided to go with the convoy. *You're a good kid. I'll miss you*.

I turned toward the broken pipe to wash my face and take a few more sips. The metallic tang that had soured in my mouth earlier was a welcome relief from thirst.

Closing my eyes, I willed what was left of my strength not to fail me. The next few miles would test my resolve to face what I had left behind and what awaited me in Rafah. I hadn't allowed myself to process what transpired in Khan Younis, nor to honestly deal with what it might have meant for Karma.

I felt a presence behind me and whirled to face whatever danger lurked, ready to strike and rip whatever it was apart with my bare hands.

Dogs and wild animals had been starved and fed on human remains. Though I wasn't dead yet, they would sense my fear and attack.

"Why are you acting weird?" Ahmad asked.

He was back to his confident and challenging self.

The convoy had long gone. I heard their engines rev one by one moments ago. Ahmad was now my responsibility.

I dropped my hands to my side and shook my head. "What are you doing here?" The words traveled on an exasperated sigh.

"Here!" He handed me a small plastic bag.

"What's this?"

A mischievous grin tossed a sparkle into his eyes. He said nothing, gesturing for me to look inside.

I frowned when I opened it. “Where did you get this?”

Ahmad raised his splinted arm to his heart and shook his head in a universal sign of a secret well-kept.

“Did you steal this?”

He closed his eyes, blocking me out.

I couldn’t argue with water, bread, and dates.

We walked south together, two liars pretending we weren’t hungry .

41 — Static and Propellers

"We love life, if we find a way to it." — Mahmoud Darwish

Now…

Khalid emerged from behind a gutted sedan when we approached the kitchen in Rafah, his face gaunt beneath three days' worth of stubble.

His gaze flicked to Ahmad, then back to me. No questions. Just a jerky nod toward the back room.

My mother and Um Khalid sat amid piles of scavenged blankets, her hands sorting beans with methodical precision, while Um Khalid was busy mending and wrapping strips of material.

My mother's fingers stilled for a beat when she saw me.

"Wash his face," she ordered, thrusting a bowl toward Ahmad. "There's lentils in the corner."

No embrace. No tears. Just this: the immediate folding of another child into her survival calculations.

When Ahmad was safe in my mother's care, Khalid yanked my sleeve, pulling me out of the structure. I didn't get a chance to tell my mother that Ahmad's aunt was waiting.

Once outside, Khalid handed me a cracked but charged phone. "Three minutes."

It showed a paused video call.

I hit play.

Karma's face filled the frame, her forehead streaked with soot. Behind her, the clinic's skeleton was somehow still standing.

"You—"

My voice failed me. I wasn't sure what to say.

"Ran the other way." She coughed, a wet sound that made Ahmad drop the bowl. "Listen. The convoy's compromised. They're hitting the"— the screen pixelated — "east route. Take the sewer line near—"

Static filled the air.

Then, a child's scream. Not Tariq's. Not any child I knew. But Karma's head whipped around, her instincts overriding everything.

The call cut off as she moved toward the sound.

Khalid retrieved the phone. "We have a contact at Al-Aqsa. They'll—"

"No." My mother's voice sliced through. She was binding Ahmad's arm with a clean cloth and sticks. "You stay."

Her words landed like iron fists.

The unspoken truth hung between us: Karma had chosen her path just as I'd chosen mine when I left Khan Younis, and just as my mother chose every day to keep living.

The wind carried the scent of salt and smoke.

Khalid's grip on my shoulder tightened as I stared at the darkened phone screen.

The silence was thick and suffocating, the kind that settled after a bomb detonated but before the screaming started.

"She's alive," I muttered.

I'd seen the same flicker of terror in Karma's face before the call died, as Khalid must've. The way her body had tensed, already moving toward danger.

Ahmad stood frozen in the doorway, lentils scattered at his feet. His good hand clutched the drone propeller with white knuckles.

My mother didn't look up from her beans. "Clean up your mess, boy."

Khalid and a man arrived at daybreak. Somewhere beyond the siege, the sea still turned silver at dawn.

"Where are you going now?" my mother asked.

"Taking Ahmad to his aunt."

"I have to get to the kitchen," Khalid said, standing at the tent opening. "Mousa will take you."

Mousa led, his rifle slung low. I carried Ahmad piggyback, his breath hot against my neck.

The “sewer line” was a myth—a half-collapsed tunnel beneath the old market, flooded with brackish water and the stench of rotting meat. But Karma had said to take it.

Ahmad’s fingers dug into my collarbone as we waded through the muck. “Do you smell that?”

I did. Sweet and metallic. The same scent that had clung to the clinic’s ruins.

Mousa stopped ahead of us. A bloated dog, its ribs picked clean, floated in the water. Beyond it, a child’s sandal.

“Don’t look,” I told Ahmad.

He buried his face in my shirt.

We emerged less than an hour later.

Rafah’s refugee blocks were a maze of graffiti and grief.

We found Siham’s tent by the smell of cardamom coffee and the sound of a radio spitting static. She emerged barefoot, her hijab streaked with flour. When she saw Ahmad’s wrist tag, her hands flew to her mouth.

“Ya Allah,” she whispered. Then, louder, “Where is Karma?”

Ahmad’s body went rigid against mine.

Siham didn’t wait for an answer. She yanked Ahmad into her arms, her sobs muffled in his hair. Over his shoulder, her eyes locked onto mine. “You left her?”

I had no defense.

Ahmad pulled another propeller from his pocket and placed it into my hand. “Give it to her.”

I kneeled before him. “She’ll need this when she finds us.”

It was a lie, but the kind that kept hearts beating.

Ahmad didn’t hug me when we stood to leave. He pressed the propeller into my palm. “Give it back to her.”

“Next time I see you, I’ll tell you how she rolled her eyes at me for carrying it.”

A ghost of a smile touched the boy’s lips. Then it vanished just as fast.

Khalid lit a cigarette, and the sting of sulfur made my eyes water.

"She's probably cursing our names right now," he said, exhaling a cloud of smoke.

I gripped the propeller tightly.

Khalid's contact at Al-Aqsa sent a grainy, soundless three-second clip, a silent scream of a video.

A field hospital corridor.

Karma, her face smeared with ash and exhaustion, half-draped in a bloodied sheet, pressing a bandage to a little girl's chest. Her lips moved in a prayer? A plea? But the video offered no answers.

Then, a flash.

The camera jerked skyward, a blur of smoke and shattered tile.

The video ended.

"No bodies means no proof," Khalid muttered, but his voice fractured on the last word. He cleared his throat, as if that could erase the tremor.

I rolled the propeller between my fingers, its grooves worn smooth from my constant handling. A secular rosary, the only ritual left to ground and calm me. Those were lies I told myself.

"What are you thinking?" Khalid probed, though his eyes said he already knew. He'd seen the way my breath hitched when the screen went dark.

His hand landed on my shoulder to steady me. Then he rubbed his stubble, the sound grating in the heavy silence. "Your mother will be fine."

But neither of us believed him.

42 — Words and Numbers

"The house of dignity has a small door." — Palestinian proverb.

Then…

"What are you doing?" Mother asked, slapping my hand away from her pots and pans.

"Measuring."

"What does that mean? Measuring kitchen stuff."

I chuckled.

"No, Yamma." I turned to face her. "We're studying…"

One of my college assignments was to measure and analyze the structure in which we lived - our home. Since my father rebuilt the kitchen a few years ago, I thought I would start there.

"Okay… okay," she said as she turned to leave.

She tossed over her shoulder, "Just keep your mind on your studies."

"I am!"

"Leave the girls alone."

I shook my head. Whether that was a stab in the dark or she knew something I didn't, I'd never ask.

Mazen thought I was insane when I mentioned Karma one evening while sitting in the café.

I was more curious about her than infatuated with her. Maybe it was the challenge I was after. She was out of reach, and I knew it.

"She's stuck up," I retorted.

"She's beyond your league. I already told you that."

I rubbed my chin. "What do you know about her?"

Mazen huffed. "Nothing."

Issa was no longer involved at that point; Khalid occasionally stopped by, while only Mazen and I spent time together as I worked on solving problems, and he wrote poetry and stories for his classes.

"What's this?" he pointed to the gridded paper I was drawing on.

"Oh, just dreaming of building a new house for my parents, outside the camp. Maybe by the shore."

Mazen tugged the paper from my grip. "I don't see a house."

"You wouldn't," I said with a chuckle.

Mazen squinted at the drawing, turning the paper sideways as if that might reveal some hidden architectural genius. "All I see are lines and numbers. Where's the house supposed to be?"

I snatched the paper back, smoothing out the creases he'd made. "It's a foundation plan, genius. You don't just start with the house—you start with what holds it up."

He rolled his eyes. "Poetry is better. You don't need grids for that, just feeling."

"And how's that working out for you?" I smirked. "Still getting Cs?"

Mazen threw a sugar packet at me. "At least I'm not pretending to be an engineer."

I ignored the jab. A house by the shore, away from the cramped alleys of the camp, where my mother wouldn't have to slap my hands away from her pots because there'd be space for both of us. A place where my father wouldn't have to rebuild things just to keep them standing.

But Mazen wouldn't grasp it. To him, the future was abstract, something he described with metaphors. To me, it was numbers, angles, materials, and things I could measure and control.

Later that night, under the dim glow of my desk lamp, I flipped through my notes. The kitchen measurements were just the start. The whole house was a puzzle of uneven walls and makeshift repairs, each corner telling a story of survival rather than design.

"Still studying?" My father stood in the doorway, his silhouette framed by the weak hallway light.

"Just finishing up," I said, closing my notebook.

He stepped inside, his eyes lingering on the sketches scattered across my desk. “What’s all this?”

I hesitated. Telling him I was designing a house felt like admitting I didn’t think our home was good enough. But my father wasn’t one for sentimentality. He picked up one of the drafts, studying it with a frown.

“You’re planning something,” he said.

“Just an assignment,” I lied.

He set the paper down. “You always were a terrible liar.”

I exhaled. “It’s… a concept. A house. Outside the camp.”

My father didn’t react right away, just rubbed his thumb along the edge of the paper. “You think we need a new house?”

“I think you shouldn’t have to keep fixing this one.”

A ghost of a smile crossed his face. “And where would this house be?”

“By the shore. Somewhere quiet.”

He nodded slowly, as if imagining it. Then, with a pat on my shoulder, he said, “Keep studying.”

That was approval enough.

The next morning, I saw Karma sitting alone under a palm tree in the college courtyard. She was always on her own, not because of shyness, but due to something sharper, as if she had decided the world wasn’t worth her engagement.

Mazen’s words echoed in my head. “*Beyond your league*.”

But curiosity won. I approached, holding up my notebook. “You’re in the structural engineering class, right?”

She glanced up, her dark eyes unreadable. “As if you don’t know?”

“I’m stuck on one of the calculations. Thought you might know.”

A beat passed. Then, to my surprise, she gestured to the spot beside her. “Show me.”

I sat down, opening my notebook to the page where I had sketched the kitchen measurements. She studied it, then pointed to a corner. “You didn’t account for the load-bearing wall here.”

“There isn’t one.”

"Then your measurements are wrong."

I frowned. "I checked twice."

"Check again."

There was no warmth in her words, no hint that she cared whether I figured it out or not. And yet, I found myself grinning.

"What's funny?" she asked.

"Nothing. Just… you're the first person who didn't call me crazy for measuring my own house."

For a second, something flickered in her expression. Then it was gone. "Maybe everyone else is the crazy one."

Mazen found me later, grinning like an idiot. "You talked to her."

"Who?"

"Don't play dumb. Karma."

I shrugged. "I needed help with an assignment."

"And I'm the next Darwish." He leaned in. "What did she say?"

"That my calculations were wrong."

Mazen burst out laughing. "Of course she did."

I shoved him, but I was smiling too. Something was thrilling about being challenged, about someone pointing out the flaws in my work.

Maybe that was why I couldn't stop thinking about her. Not because she was out of my league, but because she didn't care about leagues at all.

That evening, I re-measured the kitchen. And sure enough, Karma was right. I'd missed a crucial detail. The wall was load-bearing, disguised by layers of plaster and paint.

My mother caught me staring at it. "What now?"

"You were right," I murmured.

"About what?"

"I wasn't paying attention."

She huffed, but there was amusement in her eyes. "Finally, you admit it."

I turned to her. "Yamma, what if we could live somewhere else? Somewhere better?"

My mother stilled, her hands pausing over the cutting board. "Why?"

"Because you deserve it."

For a long moment, she didn't answer. Then, she said, "Measure the rest of the house first. Then we'll talk."

43 — Flour-Dusted Shrouds

"The hungry man dreams of bread, the full man dreams of martyrs." —Palestinian Proverb.

Now…

Khalid arranged for a donkey cart to return me to Khan Younis. He didn't need to warn me. It was faster than walking but riskier. We would be a slow-moving target, a black stain against the dust for drones to spot.

"Look after my mother if I don't return." I hadn't told her I was leaving again. She would wake to an empty cot, my note already half-buried under her grief.

Whether I stayed in Khan Younis or was martyred, I needed to make sure my mother wasn't abandoned, not that Khalid would let that happen. His flaws were many, but disloyalty died before it could reach his tongue.

He handed me a bag, his calloused fingers lingering a second too long, and waved me off. "Inshallah, you will see her."

I hoped the same: to find Karma alive and unharmed. This time, no hesitation, no half-spoken pleas. I would drag her onto this damned cart myself if I had to. Beyond that, fate was a coin midair: heads for Rafah, tails for the grave.

We didn't say goodbye or farewell. Parting was understood to mean only one of two things: death or return.

I climbed onto the open cart with two others, our bodies tense like stretched wire, heading to retrieve the bodies of the injured or dead along the way back, along with the hopeful bags of flour.

The donkey, its ribs like the bars of a cage, didn't moan under our weight. It had forgotten how.

The journey was no different than before. Drones hummed like locusts. Explosions tattooed the horizon. We sheltered where we could, our spines pressed to rubble whenever the sky sharpened into a whine.

The boy steering the donkey, Omar, thirteen but with eyes older than the olive trees, directed us with the weariness of a general. Life had carved the child out of him long ago.

We shared stale food and warm water. I fed the donkey a withered carrot, its dry crunch too loud in the silence. The beast's dark, liquid eyes held mine. There was no fear in them, just exhaustion.

As if grateful, it brayed.

Omar clamped a hand over its muzzle, hissing, "Quiet, or we join the ghosts."

Around noon, Omar stopped again, but this time to deliver prayers to an invisible and absent god. He washed and unfolded a tattered rag to use as a rug.

The two men joined him, and I stood by the cart, jaw tight, wondering what good all that did as yet another explosion rocked the earth, but didn't stop the three's momentum in standing, folding their arms, then kneeling in supplication.

They didn't question me; the war had stolen curiosity, too.

The donkey's hooves kicked up dust. Omar kept his eyes on the horizon, his hands steady on the reins even when the sky growled.

The two men, Ahmed and Yusef, murmured about their sons at Al-Nasser Hospital. I memorized their names. If we were hit, someone should remember we had existed.

Ahmed caught me staring. "You're not from here."

"Al-Shati," I said. "Now in Rafah."

Yusef bared his teeth in something too bitter to be a smile.. "Then you're a fool to come north." He jerked his chin toward the smoke rising ahead. "They're turning Khan Younis to gravel."

The cart jolted as an explosion rattled the road.

Omar didn't flinch, just tightened his grip and whispered to the donkey in a language older than war.

We found the first bodies half a kilometer from the Israeli tanks.

Two boys, no older than Omar, curled around a sack of flour like it could've saved them. Their legs were gone.

"Leave them," Yusef said. "The bags are intact."

Omar was already beside them, his fingers brushing the older boy's eyelid shut.

A tarnished crescent pendant slipped free. He pressed it to his lips before tucking it back.

I moved to help.

Yusef grabbed my arm. "You touch them, you die next. Snipers watch the dead."

Ahmed was already loading flour onto the cart, his back hunched as if expecting a bullet between his shoulders.

Omar looked at me, his eyes dry. "Should I cover their faces?"

Another explosion, this time close enough to taste.

The donkey screamed.

"No time," Yusef snapped.

We left them there, their faces tilted toward a sky that had long since stopped watching.

The city wasn't a city anymore. Just skeletons of buildings holding their organs in, and mattresses dangling from shattered windows, a child's sock snagged on rebar like a white flag that came too late.

Omar stopped at a cratered intersection. "This is where I turn back."

I jumped down, my feet sinking into ash.

He stroked the donkey's protruding spine, not looking at me. "The flour's for my sisters. They're down to eating paper when I'm late."

I shoved Khalid's bag at him: canned beans, a block of halva. Omar hesitated, then took only the halva. "*Allah yikhaleek*," he murmured. God keep you.

The cart disappeared into the smoke, the donkey's ribs visible until the very end.

Hugging rubble, I trekked to the Al-Aqsa Hospital. The courtyard was a mosaic of the living and the dead. Women howled over stretchers.

A doctor sutured a boy's arm without an anesthetic, his hands steady but his eyes wild.

I elbowed through the crowd, hoarse from shouting Karma's name.

She dug her fingernails into my shoulder. "Martyrs are in the morgue."

"I'm looking for Karma Hassan. She was helping the doc—"

A man in scrubs more crimson than blue exited a triage tent. I stopped and stared at him. *It can't be*.

The man stopped and stared at me. "Emad?"

We rushed forward, gripping each other in a tight embrace. Then stepped back and shook hands.

"When… when…" I stuttered, not believing my eyes that landed on Issa.

"I came back a year ago, when it got bad here."

The shame burned hotter than phosphorus. I'd called him a coward when he left. Now he stood in the inferno while I'd been playing chef Rafah.

"I got to get back," he said. "Stop by if you are staying around here. Maybe you can give us a hand."

With a promise to return, I turned my attention to the nurse, who seemed anxious to leave.

"He's a good man," she said.

I nodded.

"His entire family was wiped out. He could've stayed in Germany."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. I didn't need to see the ruins to know them.

The 1600-year-old stones were now blackened teeth in a screaming mouth.

Cordite had replaced incense.

The crucifix hung like a lynched man.

His mother's vibrant blue shawl, which she wore every Sunday, was now just another dirty rag in the rubble.

His father's cracked glasses were still framing eyes that would never see again

They had followed the rules and gone where the priests promised safety. They believed in ancient walls and older miracles.

But God had packed His bags with the last evacuation convoy.

Standing there, I realized that home wasn't rubble. It was the people who remembered your name.

Family wasn't blood, but who you would bleed for.

A sanctuary wasn't stone, but the space between one heartbeat and the next.

Issa had lost everything. And still he returned and stayed.

While I... what had I been fighting for?

44 — “Ask Me Again When We’re Not Dying.”

“Repeated displacement was not the worst tragedy. The silence of their absence haunts every moment. I am left to carry their memories and the weight of grief.” — Ein Alhia Haneya.

Now…

When the nurse pointed north, my legs moved before my mind could protest.

The schoolyard was a concrete wasteland. Karma stood atop a pile of debris, shouting to men hauling beams. Her hijab was gray with dust, her left wrist wrapped in a bloodied bandage.

She was alive. She was furious. She was the most beautiful thing I’d seen since the world ended.

Then she scrambled down the rubble, her fists clenched. “You suicidal idiot. They’re shelling the north road as we speak.”

I caught her by the elbows. Her skin was fever-hot. “Looking for you.”

She shook me off. “They’re bombing the evacuation routes. You could’ve—”

“I had to see you.” The words tumbled out like stones. “Come to Rafah with me. Now.”

A whistle sliced the air. We hit the ground as the world shattered around us.

When the dust settled, Karma was straddling me, her palms pressed to my ears as if she could silence the ringing.

Her lips moved. ‘Are you hurt?’

I sat up, spitting the coppery tang. The school’s west wall was gone.

Karma stood, dragging me up by the collar. “We need to move the wounded.”

"We need to leave," I insisted.

Her eyes flashed. "Measure this, engineer." She kicked a chunk of concrete. "Each piece holds someone's life. You want me to abandon the equation?"

A child wailed in the ruins. Karma was already running toward the sound.

I hesitated, then I followed as I'd done before.

We worked until dawn, digging with our hands. By morning, my nails were gone, and Karma's bandage had birthed a new shade of red.

She collapsed beside me against a half-standing wall, her breath ragged. "You're still here."

I handed her the warm dregs of my water. "You didn't answer my question."

Karma drank, then tilted her head toward the sunrise or what was left of it, behind the smoke. "Ask me again when we're not dying."

Was it a promise or a postponement? I didn't know.

Somewhere south, my mother would be praying over my empty cot, and Khalid would be watching the horizon like it might spit me back out.

And here, in the ruins, Karma's words were like a lifeline.

Nearby, a child pulled from the wreckage couldn't have been older than four. His face was streaked with dust and tears, his small hands clutching Karma's sleeve as if she were the only solid thing left in the world.

"Mama?" he whispered.

Karma's jaw tightened. She didn't answer.

I knew that look. It was the same one she wore when solving an impossible equation, the kind that would've kept her up at night. But this wasn't a problem with a clean solution.

A woman in a shredded floral dress staggered toward us, her eyes wild. "Hamza!"

She snatched the boy from Karma's arms, pressing him to her chest. She didn't thank us. She just ran.

Karma watched them go, then turned back to the rubble. "There are more."

I grabbed her wrist. “You’re bleeding again.”

She yanked free. “They’ll stitch me up later.”

We found an old man next, his legs pinned under a collapsed beam. His breath came in shallow gasps, his fingers twitching against the concrete.

Karma dropped to her knees beside him. “We need to lift this.”

I scanned the wreckage, my engineering degree laughing at me. “We need a fulcrum.”

She bared her teeth. “Then build one, *Mohandis*.” She shot me a glare. “You’re the engineer. Engineer something.”

I scanned the debris. All I found were broken pipes, splintered wood, and a twisted metal rod. I grabbed the rod, wedging it beneath the beam. “Push when I say.”

She braced herself. “Now.”

The beam groaned. The old man screamed.

But it moved. Just enough.

Karma and another man dragged him free as the beam crashed back down. His legs were a mess of blood and shattered bone.

“He won’t walk again,” I muttered.

Karma wrapped her hijab around his wounds and whispered, “He’s alive. That’s enough for now.”

By midday, the air raids returned.

We heard them before we saw them: a distant hum, like a swarm of bees. Then the sky darkened with drones.

Karma grabbed my arm. “Underground. Now.”

We herded the living into the cafeteria basement. The walls wept dust. A woman choked on sobs. A man bargained with God in two languages. A woman sobbed into her hands, and another man recited prayers under his breath.

Karma sat beside me, her shoulder pressed to mine. “You should’ve left,” she said quietly.

I wiped her blood off my hands. “You first.”

She didn’t grace that with a lie.

When we emerged, the schoolyard had written new epitaphs in fire.

Karma listed like a sinking ship. I caught her.

"You're done," I said.

She swung a weak fist. "I can still—"

"You'll get them killed when you collapse." I shook her. "One day. Medicine. Supplies. Then we return."

She searched my face for the truth. "Swear on your mother's life."

I swallowed the guilt. "On hers and yours."

Karma let her forehead rest against my collarbone for maybe one second or two, then pushed off. "One day."

We moved through the corpse of the city, past cars fossilized mid-escape.

Karma limped with each step, costing her what was left of her energy. "How much farther?"

"Far enough." My ribs sang with every breath.

She stumbled into me. "You're a terrible liar."

I caught her. "Learned from the best."

Gunfire wrote poetry in the distance.

The safe house was a toothless grin of a building. Karma folded onto the couch, her bandage now a velvety red bloom.

"You promised medicine," she slurred.

I dumped my pack. "Alcohol. Stitches. Regret."

She hissed as I cleaned the wound. "Should've let the nurse do this."

"Should've come to Rafah when I asked."

Karma laughed. Then whispered, "Next time."

I stopped breathing.

"One day. Then we go back."

I nodded, tasting the lie.

Outside, the world kept its appointment with oblivion.

But tonight, tonight we stole one more dawn.

45 — The Weight of Her Silence

"He who wants to take the moon must be prepared to fall from the sky." — Palestinian Proverb.

Now…

Karma slumped against the wall. I counted intervals as her chest rose and fell with each shallow breath.

Tears silently rolled down from beneath her closed lids, whether caused by physical pain or emotional exhaustion, I wasn't sure.

My fingers twitched; to wipe them would be a violation of a longstanding cultural tradition.

An hour bled away. Karma's cheeks were flushed, and her injured hand twitched in her lap. I took a chance and gently placed the back of my hand on her forehead, and the heat licked up my arm like a flame.

This wasn't resting slumber.

I shook her, pressing a bottle of water to her cracked lips. "Karma, look at me."

She opened her eyes just enough for me to see how glazed they were. Karma mumbled something incoherently.

Then, she went slack, lolling to one side in an awkward twist.

Cold terror flooded my veins. The road stretched empty in both directions with no help, no mercy, just the waiting jaws of the ruined city.

I hauled her up, her dead weight turning my muscles to liquid fire.

Khan Younis was closer. The hospital might still stand. The doctors might still breathe.

Salty perspiration dripped into my eyes as I furiously tried to blink them away, afraid of dropping Karma, who had not awakened.

At the corpse of a bombed-out bakery, my legs gave out.

I gently laid her in the shade and tried to coax water through her parched lips.

Karma didn't move, and I longed for her to wake up and tell me, "Do *not* ever touch me!"

She didn't say a word, and the water dripped down her cheek, and the sand swallowed it.

"Wake up and slap me," I begged. "Wake up and call me a fool."

Silence.

Overwhelmed with fear and exhaustion, I kneeled beside her and lifted my gaze to the endless sky marred by warplane fumes. I wanted to beg that invisible entity, bargain with it, threaten it… But I shook my head instead and lowered my eyes to where Karma lay. I was the only one who could make a difference.

I tore a strip of Karma's scarf to use as a headband, keeping the sweat at bay, and took a long drink from the same bottle that had touched Karma's lips.

Filling my lungs with the polluted air, I lifted her once more and willed my body to cooperate, reciting, "A few more steps. Just a few more."

When Omar's cart appeared through the haze, I nearly collapsed with relief.

"Can you—"

My voice shattered like Gaza's bones.

Omar took one look and moved with the efficiency of those who had buried too many friends. "Wouldn't be my first funeral ride," he said, loading her between two sheet-covered corpses.

I collapsed into the cart, Karma's limp hand in mine, her pulse a threadbare stitch holding my world together.

The hospital courtyard had metastasized into fresh hell while we were gone. New bodies lined the walls, their faces covered with scraps of cloth instead of dignity.

I collapsed to the ground, dragging Karma against my chest. Her head lolled like a broken doll's.

A nurse materialized from the chaos, his scrubs more blood than fabric. "Another ghost or a fighter?"

“She’s both,” I said. “Please—”

“Unless she’s bleeding out or not breathing, we have no beds.” He turned away, already forgetting us.

I lunged, grabbing his arm. My knees hit the concrete hard enough to crack bones. “I'll trade my veins for hers. Take my blood, my breath, my—”

He tried to shake me off, dragging me through dirt and discarded bandages. I clung like a starving dog. Gone was my pride; it left months ago

“Enough.”

“What’s going on?” a familiar voice asked.

I looked up, letting go of the nurse, and jumped to my feet. Clutching Issa’s sleeves. “Five minutes,” I begged. “Just look at her.”

Beyond the tent flaps, someone screamed for a surgeon. Issa’s eyes flickered toward the sound.

“You can’t let her die. She has done so much for others.”

With a muttered curse, Issa pressed two fingers to Karma's wrist. His face did that thing doctors learn: where hope goes to die quietly.

“You can’t let her die,” I screamed.

Issa peeled back Karma's bandage. The wound wept yellow betrayal. “Even if we had antibiotics—”

“Liar!” I braced my forehead against Karma’s shoulder, inhaling the sour scent of infection. “Wake up and call him a coward,” I whispered. “Wake up and prove them wrong.”

“Wait here,” Issa said.

I leaned my head on my folded arms beside Karma, uttering a prayer I had heard my mother recite when Amina was sick. Desperation led to grasping at straws.

They took her away while I stood paralyzed, before I bolted forward.

Issa blocked my path, his arm a steel bar across my chest. “The best thing you can do for her now is work.”

A child’s high, thin, relentless wail pierced the air from the triage tent.

I swallowed the vitriol rising in my throat. There were no choices here. Only triage. Only the arithmetic of survival.

But as I turned toward the ruins, my hands curled into fists. They'd have to chain me to keep me from that tent when night fell.

46 — What the Rubble Could Not Steal

"Prices are unbearable. Flour, sugar, even vegetables. But we want to live with dignity. We keep working, hoping that's all we do. Still, dignity comes at a price." — Hosam Al Layli.

Now…

Patience wasn't a virtue as I waited to hear from Issa. Karma, the engineering student-turned-medic, had sacrificed so much and deserved to live.

It was difficult to focus on anything else, wondering what would become of me if she died.

The jagged mortar I leaned against bit into my shoulders and back as I squatted outside the hospital confines. It grounded me in the reality of the many who lost everything, yet remained steadfast. It would've been what Karma would insist on.

I thought of Jafar Atallah, whose pottery factory was reduced to rubble. He built a tent no larger than a living room and resumed making bowls and water jugs, sleeping in a corner of the makeshift shelter. Then, there were Hosam Al Layli's words that echoed in my mind as he sat in the hot sun, repurposing old clothes and mending what he could. People who created order from chaos while I drowned in maybes.

Many others kept hope alive, and there I stood, feeling sorry for myself.

Shame propelled me to the school ruins. Dozens clawed at the wreckage with naked hands, their fingers raw as butchered meat. I joined them. There were no instructions needed in this algebra of desperation.

Ignoring hunger and thirst, I did what others were doing: called out, then dug.

After hours of frantic work, we rescued a few, some barely hanging on to life.

A cat also appeared from the rubble, looking at me with big, sad blue eyes. I picked it up, holding it close to my chest, then looked for water and food to give. I had only taken a few steps when a girl ran toward me, yanking the cat out of my arms.

"Bisbis!" She ran toward a woman in the shade. "Mama! Bisbis!" she yelled.

Empty-handed, I instantly missed the warmth of another soul.

When there was nothing else to do, I turned to leave the demolished school. It wasn't that I had forgotten about Karma and her fate the entire time; I was afraid of facing the reality of her possible demise. But now, there was nothing left to distract me. I returned to the hospital.

"*Shukran*, my son," the woman said as I passed her.

I let her know there was no need for thanks with a wave.

"Here." She handed me a half-filled water bottle.

Knowing she didn't have much, I didn't want to accept it, but declining her generosity would have been an insult. So, I took the water and nodded in thanks.

The hospital loomed before me, its battered walls a grim reminder of everything we had lost.

My legs rebelled with every step, knowing would make it real.

Inside, the chaos had not lessened. The air was thick with antiseptic and sweat, mingling with the metallic scent of blood. Moans and whimpers filled the corridors, creating a symphony of suffering.

Nurses and volunteers moved like ghosts, their faces hollow with exhaustion.

I scanned the room, searching for Issa.

Then I saw him standing near a bloodstained curtain, peeling off surgical gloves. His face was grim.

I forced myself forward. "Karma." I swallowed my fear. "Is she alive?"

He hesitated, which was a bad sign.

"She's alive," he said finally. "But there were complications."

My stomach dropped. "What kind of complications?"

Issa exhaled, rubbing his forehead. “Her right hand was infected beyond repair. We had to amputate.”

The words hit me like a sledgehammer. *Amputate*.

I swayed, gripping the wall for support. Karma, brilliant, stubborn Karma, who dug through wreckage with her bare hands, now had only one.

Issa misread my silence for anger. “We had no choice. Gangrene had already set in. If we hadn’t taken it, she would have died.”

I swallowed hard. “Can I see her?”

He nodded. “She’s sedated, but she’ll wake soon. Third room on the left.”

I walked like a man in a nightmare.

The curtain parted on a nightmare: Karma smaller somehow, her bandaged arm terminating in a brutal comma. A rust-colored bloom seeped through the gauze.

I collapsed into the chair, grief a live wire in my throat. If I’d dragged her to Khan Younis sooner—

A weak groan cut through my thoughts.

Karma’s eyelids fluttered. She blinked up at the ceiling, disoriented, before her gaze landed on me.

“You’re still here,” she rasped.

I forced a smile.

She tried to push herself up, then froze. Her left hand twitched toward her right arm, then stopped. She stared at the bandaged stump, her face eerily blank.

A long silence amid the outside chaos landed between us.

“They took it.” It came out as a whisper.

I couldn’t lie to her. “Yeah.”

She exhaled sharply, her jaw tightening. For a moment, I thought she’d scream, or cry, or rage, but she just closed her eyes.

“Karma—”

“I need a minute,” she murmured.

I nodded and stepped outside, giving her space. But I didn’t go far. I leaned against the wall, sliding down until I sat on the floor, my head in my hands.

A nurse paused beside me. “She’ll need time,” she said.

Karma was an engineer. A problem-solver. A woman who wanted to build and fix things. With her hands.

How do you mourn the loss of a future you hadn’t even lived yet?

For three days, I haunted the corridors, surviving on stolen glances through her curtain.

On the fourth morning, I found her wrestling with buttons, her left hand betraying her with every fumble.

I offered water instead of pity. “Aid trucks might come next week.”

She took the cup with her left hand. Her movements were awkward. “Good.”

Karma said nothing else.

I studied her. The dark circles under her eyes. The way she held her right arm slightly away from her body, as if she’d forgotten it wasn’t there anymore.

“Karma,” I said carefully. “You don’t have to—”

“I’m going back out there,” she interrupted.

I stared at her. “You’re not serious.”

She met my gaze. “People are still buried. Still dying. You think I’m just going to sit here?”

“You can’t dig anymore,” I said. I regretted my words as soon as they left my lips.

Her jaw clenched. “Then I’ll direct. I’ll organize. I’ll do something.”

I wanted to argue. To tell her she needed rest, recovery, and time to grieve.

The fire in her voice scorched my doubts to ash.

47 — You Love the Idea of Me

"Love under bombardment isn't romantic—it's insistence on remaining." — Najwan Darwish.

Now…

Karma couldn't lift rubble anymore. But she remembered the building's layout. Knew where survivors might be trapped.

And she was right.

We pulled three people out that day because of her.

At sunset, she sat on a broken wall, staring at her bandaged arm.

I sat beside her, handing her a piece of bread. She took it without meeting my eyes.

Then, out of nowhere, she said, "I'll learn to write left-handed."

"What?" I blinked in confusion.

"Engineering diagrams," she said. "I'll relearn. It'll take time, but I'll do it."

This time, I really looked at her. At the stubborn set of her shoulders and the determination in her eyes.

I stood and shuffled, rubbing my chin. I had to return to Rafah and wasn't sure how to approach the subject. It had been days since I had heard from Khalid, and I wondered how my mother was.

She suddenly said, "Go… get out of here."

Unsure of what she meant, I stopped pacing and turned to her.

"I don't need you or your pity."

Shaking my head, I kneeled before her, searching for words that wouldn't trigger her ire. The last thing I needed was for her to cut me loose.

Karma turned away from me, and I stood, still digging for what to say.

Anger boiled and bubbled within me, at our situation, at the injustice, and at Karma, who was too arrogant and blind to see I genuinely cared for her.

"Look! I had enough…" I ranted about losing my home, my sister, my friends. I let her know she wasn't the only one suffering, and the amputation wasn't the end of the world. She was still alive. "I left my mother to check on you!"

Karma casually turned to face me with a sidelong look, her eyes sparkling with something I couldn't identify… unshed tears? Mockery?

She shook her head. "And you made all this,"—she gestured to the ruins around us—"about you?"

I ran my hands over my face, feeling a beard I hadn't planned to grow covering my hollow cheeks. My words sounded like those of a spoiled child, and I knew it the moment they left my lips. Karma didn't ask me to leave my mother. She didn't ask me to check on her or to stay as long as I did.

Foolish and humiliated, I lashed back. "I have the right to grieve and mourn loss." Since I was on a roll, I continued, "I love you, Karma. That's why I returned to Khan Younis. Do with this as you wish."

Her mouth dropped open, but not a peep escaped. The silence stretched between us, with sirens and voices calling out to each other in the background. All I could focus on was the pounding of my heart and the raggedness of my breath.

Finally, she exhaled sharply. "You don't love me," Karma said. "You love the idea of me. The version of me that wasn't broken."

I flinched. "That's not true."

"Isn't it?" She flexed the fingers of her remaining hand, staring at them like they were foreign. "You came back because you thought I needed saving. But I don't. Not from this. Not from you."

I opened my mouth to argue, but she cut me off.

"You should go to Rafah. Your mother needs you more than I do."

The dismissal stung, but beneath it, I heard something else: resignation.

I swallowed hard. "And what if I need you?"

Karma looked at me then, and for the first time since the bombs fell, I saw the cracks in her armor. The way her lower lip trembled before she pressed her lips together. The way her fingers curled into her palm, nails biting into flesh.

"Then you're a fool," she whispered.

I stepped closer, broken concrete poking through my sandals. "Maybe I am."

She didn't pull away when I reached for her hand. Her skin was rough, calloused from digging through rubble, from holding on too tight to whatever remained.

"I'm not leaving because I pity you," I said. "I'm leaving because you're right, my mother does need me. But that doesn't mean I'm walking away from you."

Karma scoffed, but there was no heat in it. "You say that now."

"I'll keep saying it." I squeezed her hand. "Every damn day, if I have to."

For a long moment, she didn't respond. Then, with a sigh so deep it seemed to come from her bones, she leaned forward, resting her forehead against mine.

"Stubborn idiot," she muttered.

I laughed, the sound rough and unfamiliar in my throat. "Takes one to know one."

We stayed like that, breathing the same air, sharing the same silence.

Around us, the ruins of Khan Younis stretched endlessly, a graveyard of memories and futures cut short. But in that small space between us, there was something fragile. Something alive.

Finally, she pulled back. "Go," she said. "Before it gets dark."

I nodded, stepping away. "I'll be back."

I walked backward, drinking in her silhouette against the burning sky. "HEAL kitchen. Ask for Khalid."

She didn't wave. But she didn't look away either.

The road to Rafah swallowed my footsteps whole, but I stopped outside the hospital like a coward.

I hadn't had a chance to speak with Issa, not that he would have time for idle chat.

I pushed my way through

Inside, hell had redecorated:

A girl of nine clutched an IV bag, her stillness more terrible than screams.

A toddler's blue lips pressed against by a doctor who knew it was theater.

The mother beside them, not grieving, not yet, just waiting for her turn to feel.

A sob clawed its way up my throat, but it didn't come. There was no sound, no breath, just the ringing in my ears, the weight of the world collapsing inward.

"Dr. Issa?" I asked anyone in my path.

Several minutes later, I spotted him removing his bloodied gloves, discarding them in the corner of a hallway, past the filled trash bins. The discarded latex stuck to the blood-slick floor.

"Issa," I called.

He heaved his shoulders with what I assumed was an exasperated sigh.

Issa finally turned, shaking his head, his face a road map of exhaustion. "What now?"

He had aged a million years since I last saw him a few years ago.

"I'm sorry about your family."

Issa shook his head. "You walked through this to offer condolences?" He swept his arms in an arc, encompassing the injured and dying.

With my eyes to the floor, I said, "No… just thank you for taking care of Karma."

Something akin to a chuckle escaped Issa's lips, but before words of derision hit me, I said, "I'm leaving for Rafah… my mother."

When I looked up, there was almost a smile on Issa's lips, but exhaustion won, and he said, "She'll be fine. Go look after your mother."

I nodded, and Issa walked toward the courtyard and the street with me, weaving through bodies strewn everywhere. Some were covered with caked, bloodied flour. Those were the ones who risked their lives to get to the 'humanitarian lines,' where they were unmoving targets for the cynical soldiers who entertained themselves by shooting the starving standing in long lines.

As I left the hospital, I turned to Issa.

Our handshake lasted three heartbeats. No words.

As I walked away, the weight of his world pressed between my shoulder blades. Issa would stay because someone had to.

48 — Fragment of Life

"In Gaza, we love life, if we find a way to it." — Refaat Alareer

Now…

The sun was a bleeding wound over Khan Younis as I tightened the straps of my backpack with trembling fingers.

I swallowed hard. Leaving Karma would take its toll on me. I still thought of her sitting on the wall, one hand in a half wave, the other sleeve pinned neatly where flesh and bone should have been. The absence still startled me, but not as much as the fire in her eyes.

But nothing was simple here. Not the rubble under our feet, not the distant echoes of drones, not the way my heart split between the woman I was leaving and the mother waiting miles away.

"I'll come back," I had said, because anything else was unthinkable.

I thought of her smirk and that stubborn tilt of her chin, which I loved. "Good. Because we still have work to do."

Karma meant the rescue mission. The one she carried out with relentless determination, even now, even with one hand. Even as the world kept falling apart around us.

Trying to distance my mind from Karma, I looked around me as I walked. The journey to Rafah was a gauntlet of ghosts.

I moved like a shadow between shattered buildings, avoiding open roads where predator drones circled the target on my back. The landscape wasn't shaped by time, but by the precise cruelty of mathematics: this much explosives, this many dead.

The air reeked of melted wiring and meat left too long in the sun.

To my right, a crater gaped where a playground once stood. The swing set was still there, twisted into a skeletal grin, one lone chain click-click-clicking in the wind.

A child's shoe lay half-buried in the dirt. I didn't stop. Stopping meant I would remember the kids who used to laugh here.

A checkpoint loomed ahead: rusted barrels, a makeshift barricade manned by exhausted-looking men with rifles. I kept my head down, my papers ready.

"Where to?" one grunted.

"Rafah," I said. "Family."

He eyed me, then jerked his chin forward. "Move fast. They hit this road yesterday."

I didn't need to ask who they were.

Rafah was a city of shadows. I had thought Khan Younis was bad. Rafah was now worse.

The streets were gutted, buildings reduced to hollow shells. Families huddled in tents made from scraps, their faces gaunt, their eyes empty.

The market, once lively with voices and spices, was now a graveyard of broken stalls.

A man sat on the ground, staring at a single tomato in his palm like it was a jewel.

And the silence. God, the silence. Not the absence of sound, but the absence of life. No music, no arguments, no children shrieking in play. Just the low murmur of grief, the occasional wail from a mourning woman, the distant, ever-present hum of war machines.

I quickened my pace, my chest tightening. *Please. Let my mother be okay*.

The alley leading to the kitchen was narrow, the walls scarred by shrapnel. But the door to the back room was still there. The blue paint was chipped, the hinges rusted, but it was there.

I knocked twice, then a third time, our old signal.

There was a pause. Then shuffling feet approached.

The door creaked open, and Khalid stood there staring at me.

"Yamma?"

He motioned to the back, but didn't berate me for being gone. Maybe that would come later.

I walked around Khalid to where my mother sat, still sorting through the material, as I had left her days before.

Her face, once round and warm, was all sharp angles now. Her hair, usually wrapped in a bright scarf, was streaked with more gray than I remembered. But her eyes; those hadn't changed. They were filled with the same fierce, unyielding love.

"Emad," she breathed, like she was afraid saying my name too loud would make me vanish.

I fell into her arms, my throat burning. She felt smaller and more fragile, as if I had been gone for years.

My mother's hands fluttered over me like she was checking for wounds. "You're alive," she muttered. "Alhamdulillah, you're alive."

The space was dim, the windows boarded up. A single candle flickered on the table.

"You're thinner," she scolded. "And dirty. When was the last time you ate?"

I smiled despite everything. Some things never changed.

She moved toward the camp-like fire. "I'll make you tea."

I saw the way her fingers shook as she fanned the flames. The way she glanced at the ceiling every time a distant explosion rattled the walls.

I should have come back sooner.

As I sat on the floor, the warmth of tea seeping into my palms, the guilt settled in. Karma was still out there. Still fighting. And I was here, safe, if only for a moment.

My mother's eyes narrowed. "You're not staying." It wasn't a question.

I exhaled. "I can't."

She didn't argue. She brushed my hand with her fingers. "The girl in Khan Younis?"

I stiffened. "How did you—"

"A mother knows." She sighed. "Is she worth it?"

I didn't hesitate. "Yes."

My mother nodded, but I couldn't read her thoughts.

"Then you'd better survive," she muttered.

I lay on the floor, propping my head on bunched-up sacks that would soon be shredded for wound care. My head spun with thoughts, guilt gnawing at the edges. How could I leave my mother? Abandon the kitchen that Khalid said would still have me? But how could I let go of Karma?

With death and destruction around me, did I have the right to look for happiness in the bleeding sky?

The remarkable thing about Palestinians was their resilience and their ability to grasp the faintest thread of hope amid daily tragedy. Although subdued, there were weddings, birth celebrations, and discussions of rebuilding.

Outside, the distant thud of artillery shook the walls. My mother slept fitfully beside me, her breath shallow. Khalid had left hours ago to check on a neighbor's collapsed home. The candle had long burned out, leaving us in darkness.

I couldn't sleep.

My fingers found the drone propeller in my pocket that Ahmad had given me from the Al-Awda school bombing. Its edges had worn smooth from constant handling, like a perverse worry stone.

"For Karma," Ahmad had said.

For the clinic. For the resistance, I thought.

Because that was what this was: resistance. Not just with guns or stones, but with stitches, with shared bread, with stories whispered to children so they wouldn't forget the names of their villages.

A muffled sound made me turn. My mother was awake, watching me.

"You're thinking of her," she whispered.

I didn't deny it.

She brushed my cheek with her calloused fingers. "You think I don't know what it's like? To love someone while the world burns?"

I stared at her.

"Your father," she said.

His mention was like a blade stabbing my chest.

"He used to say, 'They can take our land, our homes, even our lives, but they will never take our will.' And he was right."

I swallowed hard. "How do you keep going?"

She smiled, faint but unbroken. "Because surrender is death. And we…we are life."

At dawn, I stepped outside. The air was thick with smoke, but the muddy strips between rows of tents were already stirring.

A group of children, their faces smudged with dirt, darted past, laughing as they kicked a makeshift ball of rags. Further down, an old woman swept the rubble from her doorstep, as if insisting on normalcy in the absurdity of war.

And then I saw them: the volunteers.

A line of men and women, some young, some old, carrying buckets, shovels, and medical kits. They moved with purpose, digging through debris, handing out water, and bandaging wounds. No uniforms, no flags, just people refusing to let their neighbors suffer alone.

One of them spotted me. "Emad! You're back!"

It was Jamal, a teacher whose school had been bombed last month. Now, he taught lessons in the rubble, scribbling math equations on broken pieces of concrete.

"You joining us today?" he asked.

I hesitated, then nodded. "I'll be in the kitchen."

Because this was resistance, too.

I owed it to my people not to give up. I owed it to my father, my mother, and all the friends who became martyrs in this genocide. I owed it to the children who were still here and those who would not see a future.

My father and mother didn't give up. My grandparents didn't give up. They built and rebuilt to keep Palestine alive in our hearts.

49 — Seventy-Five Years of Temporary

"The world cannot give us back what we have lost, but it can and must demand accountability for what was taken." —Sarona Abu Akleh (Niece of slain journalist Shireen Abu Akleh):

Then…

The jasmine shed petals like snow as I walked through our courtyard, remembering the story my father told me about the keys and how he, too, along with my grandfather, had planted this same trellised vine the year before the Nakba.

"A home isn't just walls," he'd said, pressing the rusted key from their lost village into my palm. "It's what grows despite them."

Now, the key hung by the door.

I stopped and looked at the house, the one that was supposed to be temporary. Seventy-five years of "temporary."

The bricks were stacked haphazardly, the mortar cracked from last week's airstrike.

My calculations had been off. Karma had smirked as I'd stubbornly insisted the angles would hold.

"You're an engineer, not a magician," she'd said.

I crouched, running my fingers along the fractures. The problem wasn't just the bombing. It was the blockade.

No cement. No rebar. No tools.

For seventeen years, Gaza had been sealed like a tomb, every shipment of construction materials denied as "dual-use" by the occupation. As if rebuilding a bombed hospital was a military act.

So we improvised. Crushed rubble from destroyed homes became aggregate. Stolen UNRWA tarps were used to weave roofing. And

always, always, the calculations were off, because how do you measure the force of a missile with a child's school calculator?

A shadow fell across the wall. My father stood behind me, holding a dented teakettle.

"Stop brooding. The house won't collapse today."

"It might," I muttered.

He poured tea into two glasses. "Then we'll rebuild it tomorrow."

We sat under the jasmine and drank in silence, the tea bitter with seawater, because the desalination plant had been bombed again the previous week.

Inside, my mother knelt beside the radio, tuning it to Al-Aqsa Voice through the static.

The announcer's voice crackled. "Thirty martyrs in Jabalia this morning, including Dr. Majdi al-Haddad and his entire family—"

She switched it off.

On the wall behind her, our family photos hung crooked—my grandfather in his olive groves in Beit Daras. My father, as a young man, stood in front of this very house when it was still an UNRWA tent. And me, age six, holding a watermelon slice bigger than my head. That was back when fruits still grew in Gaza's soil before the siege strangled our farms.

Khalid and Mazen knocked, then entered.

My mother caught me staring. "The Haddad clinic was hit too," she said quietly.

My chest tightened. I reached for my phone, but there was no signal. Again.

"They cut the networks," Khalid said. "Like always."

Of course. Collective punishment. A lesson from the occupation's oldest playbook: Isolate. Terrify. Erase.

The next afternoon, on my way home from the university, I walked to the market, or what was left of it. The once-vibrant souq was now a skeletal strip of stalls selling canned UN rations and wilted onions.

A boy no older than twelve hawked single cigarettes, priced at half a shekel each. Inflation's cruel arithmetic: A loaf of bread now costs 15 shekels, nearly a day's wage for a laborer.

I passed the ruins of the Great Omari Mosque, its 7th-century minaret toppled like a felled tree. A mural on the adjacent wall showed a hand clutching a key, the words "We Will Return" spray-painted beneath. The paint was fresh. Someone had redrawn it last night, despite the military orders banning Palestinian flags and symbols.

At the spice stall, Abu Ahmad weighed cumin into a scrap of newspaper. His scales were balanced with rifle casings. There were no proper weights left after the last invasion.

"You heard?" he muttered. "They're confiscating the fishing boats again."

I clenched my jaw. The "fishing zone" had already been reduced to 3 nautical miles, and gunboats patrolled the waters. Now, even that was being stolen.

A sudden roar overhead made us freeze as drones circled like carrion flies.

A child screamed. Then there was nothing. It was another false alarm.

Abu Ahmad exhaled. "They want us to live in constant fear." He tapped his temple. "But we count their crimes. Every one."

Dinner was bread, olive oil, and za'atar, along with ground chickpeas. It was our version of protein now that meat was a memory.

My mother hummed as she cooked, a folk song about Jaffa's oranges.

Khalid slammed the door open. His face was flushed. "They're bulldozing the cemetery in Beit Hanoun! To build another settler road!"

The spoon slipped from my mother's hand.

We ran.

By the time we arrived, it was too late. The armored bulldozers had gouged the earth, bones, and shattered headstones littering the dirt.

A teenage girl wailed as she clutched a femur; perhaps it was her grandmother's.

An old man rocked back and forth, whispering names like a prayer: "Yusuf, Aziza, little Hassan..."

A soldier's voice crackled through a megaphone. "Disperse or face live fire."

Khalid lunged forward. I grabbed his arm.

"Don't," I hissed. "They'll shoot you."

He shook me off. "And what? Wait for them to shoot us tomorrow instead?"

A stone flew through the air, and then another. The soldiers raised their rifles.

My mother's scream tore through the night as the shots rang out.

Epilogue — The Sky Remembers

"I've heard more explosions than Palestinian songs. But no matter how many times it happens, nothing prepares you for the pause that follows." — Samah Zaher Zaqout.

Now, Rafah, Gaza 2025…

The sun sank into the horizon, casting long, skeletal shadows over the rubble-filled streets of Rafah. The air was thick with the sharp sting of phosphorus and the persistent scent of jasmine—nature's quiet rebellion against the smell of burning concrete and charred flesh. After two years of the "final offensive," the city had been erased and rebuilt countless times, so much so that even the ghosts appeared lost.

I sat cross-legged beside my mother on the floor of what was left of the charity kitchen: three walls and a ceiling that leaked when it rained, though rain had become as mythical as peace. Her hands moved methodically, darning a UN blanket with thread pulled from her headscarf, just as Um Khalid had taught her. The fabric was now more patched than the original material, like Gaza itself.

Khalid leaned against the doorframe, the glow of his cigarette cutting through the gloom. We hadn't had electricity in eleven months. The Israeli drones saw everything anyway; why bother with lights?

The silence between us was a living thing. It held the weight of Khalid's family, buried in a mass grave near Nuseirat. The tremor in my mother's hands that hadn't left since the white phosphorus attack last winter. The way we all pretended not to hear the wet cough coming from little Aya next door; tuberculosis, probably, though with no functioning hospitals left, diagnoses were just guesses whispered over tea leaves.

Karma's voice echoed in my skull. "*Ask me again when we're not dying*."

My mother broke the silence first. “The Nassers tried to plant wheat in the cemetery,” she said, not looking up from her stitching. “The drones sprayed it with herbicide before it sprouted.”

Khalid exhaled smoke through his nose. “They’re using the same stuff on the tent camps now. Called it ‘vegetation control’ in their press release.”

I thought of the last time I’d seen actual bread, six months ago, when airdropped aid sacks fell into the sea and children drowned trying to retrieve them. Now we ate “Gaza cake.” Ground chickpeas mixed with wild mallow leaves, baked on scrap metal over open fires. The taste lingered like regret.

My mother’s hands shook as she knotted the thread. They called them the “Rafah tremors.” They had malnutrition-induced neuropathy affecting half the population.

I’d caught her last week giving her entire food ration to the stray cat that nested in our rubble pile. “She’s feeding kittens,” she’d said, as if that explained everything.

A sudden wail pierced the dark. It wasn’t a siren, but a human. Old Man Hisham was mourning again. His entire family had been vaporized in the “safe zone” bombing last month, but he still set five places for dinner every evening.

Khalid’s cigarette glowed close to his tobacco-stained fingers. “They’re jamming signals again.”

I checked the cracked screen of my solar-charged phone. No network. Israel’s new tactic was elegant in its cruelty: sever all communication, then bomb the areas where people clustered, searching for a signal. During the last blackout, they’d hit three bakeries simultaneously.

Khalid lit another cigarette off the embers of the last. The pack was empty. He’d rolled the paper from a torn Hebrew textbook. I recognized the page that said, ‘And God said to Abraham: Go forth.’

He smirked. “Funny. Their scripture commands exile, but calls us trespassers.”

My mother reached for the hand-crank radio, tuning through static until a voice emerged.

"—reports of cholera spreading in Deir al-Balah's water camps. With sewage treatment plants destroyed and 98% of water contaminated..."

She clicked it off. Some truths were too heavy to carry before supper.

In the corner, our "emergency bags" gathered dust: backpacks stuffed with deeds to lands we'd never seen, birth certificates for the dead, but missing the rusted keys to my great-grandfather's house in Lod.

Mine also contained:

- A bullet pulled from someone's spine (2023)
- A USB drive with 85,700 names (the current martyrs' count)

Includes:

~25,000–30,000 children (per UNICEF trauma reports)

~12,000–15,000 women

~1,200+ healthcare workers (WHO)

~150+ journalists (CPJ)

We called them emergency bags, but we all knew the truth that these were our exhibits for the war crimes trial that would never come.

My mother's hand covered mine. "Emad," she said. "You'll go back to Karma, won't you?"

I nodded, staring at the wall where a clock used to be. "The field hospital's collapsing. They need engineers."

She didn't argue. Mother never did. Instead, she pressed something into my palm: her wedding band, the gold worn thin. "Then promise me one thing."

"Anything."

Her grip could have crushed diamonds. "Promise you'll keep living. Not just breathing. Living."

The distinction tasted like blood. To breathe was to choke on the dust of your neighbor's pulverized home. To live was to name the feral cats after dead poets. To teach children geometry by counting bomb craters.

At first light, I stepped over the carcass of an Israeli Merkava tank that was abandoned when the ground invasion stalled last winter. The ruins whispered secrets:

- A child's math notebook fluttering from barbed wire (If one rocket falls every 3 minutes, how many...?)
- The stench of 200 bodies under the Al-Shifa Hospital parking lot
- A mural reading: "We Will Bake Bread From Your Tanks."

Near the old spice market, a young girl sold "survival kits:" bullet casings repurposed as candle holders, grenade canisters with planted greens, and shrapnel reshaped into fishing hooks. I traded the propeller for a casing engraved with a jasmine vine.

For Karma, I thought. *A weapon turned into beauty*.

I found Issa in the "hospital," a network of stolen sewage pipes and UN tents. No anesthesia. No IV fluids. Just vinegar distilled from rotten fruit and YouTube tutorials for amputations.

"Have you seen her?"

He jerked his head to the left.

I raced to where Karma knelt. Her prosthetic hand, 3D-printed from a Turkish aid shipment, clicked as she steadied the man they recently rescued.

"You're late," she said.

The man on the floor had no face left—just teeth where his mouth should be.

I held up the bullet casing. "Brought you a flower."

Her laugh was brittle, but it was still a laugh.

Outside, the drones sang their mechanical lullabies. Inside, the medics stitched the sky back together, one screaming body at a time.

I fingered the wedding band my mother gave me, a rosary of hope for a free Palestine. The gold band was warm from my mother's skin. I remembered her slipping it off each dawn to knead dough, her knuckles flecked with flour like tiny stars. "This ring survived my mother's '48 expulsion," she'd say. "It'll survive this."

Now, as Karma helped the wounded man, I wondered if survival was an heirloom or a curse.

Karma pocketed the bullet-casing flower. “Still prettier than the ones in your mother’s garden,” she said.

I didn’t tell her that the phosphorus had scorched the soil, leaving it a salt-white color. That my mother now planted mint in tank shells, whispering, “See how life laughs at them?”

Drones still patrolled the sky above, but it was also filled with birds. And sometimes, when the wind was just right, you could hear the faint sound of children flying kites, their laughter rising above the ruins.

I turned to leave. The horizon stretched before me, endless and uncertain, but I walked forward anyway. Because here, under the same sky, we still lived. We still hoped. And we still remembered.

The sky remembered, and so did we.

The Birth of Under the Same Sky

"There are many stories and tales from Gaza that remain untold and undocumented simply because they are unknown. Missing stories are like their missing owners: We do not know if they are dead, alive, prisoners, or still under the rubble of the houses."
— Hassan Abu Sitta

Dust motes floated in the filtered rays slipping through half-closed blinds. I watched, unable to fit the next yellow jigsaw piece into the mandala pattern on the kitchen table. This latest distraction of mine, spending hours fitting jagged-edged pieces together, replaced the words I used to write.

I glanced at the unfinished puzzle, forcing my gaze away from the light, and twirled the three-legged piece, wondering how alike we were. I must fit into this life mandala somewhere, don't I?

Then why do I feel so alone, so utterly broken, like the discarded gray cracked vase on the windowsill?

Slowly, I tossed the yellow piece on the pile before me and rose. The coffee I forgot to drink now sat cold — I refused to drink cold, stale coffee.

I took the cup to the sink and emptied its contents, aiming for a fresh brew, then burst into uncontrollable tears as guilt consumed every part of me. Earlier, I read about a man in Gaza who was separated from his family. He was in the North, and his wife and child were in Rafah. She refused to eat because he had no food.

The man approached the next makeshift tent and asked them to take a picture of him sitting by a pot with boiled chicken and potatoes. He sent it to his wife, assuring her he had plenty to eat, and begged her to take care of herself and their child. He didn't tell her the pot was meant

to feed eighteen people. He didn't mention that his last meal was the day before: boiled weeds and dry bread someone had given him.

I wanted to scoop the coffee I poured down the drain, lick every drop, and be thankful I had it. Then, I forego the hot beverage craving and sipped the tepid water left in a glass from the day before.

"Survivor's guilt," I'm told, I suffered.

"Living with grief has many levels and stages."

But it was much more than that, far more profound. The pain had carved itself into my core, jagged like the cracks in the broken gray vase I refused to throw away.

* * *

Days passed, and the puzzle remained unfinished. Each cup I brewed, I drank to the last drop. I rationed my food, choking on every bite. When will this end? I asked myself.

"Where is humanity that allows genocide and starvation of innocent Palestinians?" I constantly asked the universe.

I wandered from room to room, checked social media, and opened a fresh document, hoping the blinking cursor magically expressed what was boiling within me.

"Write what you feel," friends encouraged.

"Scream the injustice on paper."

How do I tell them that what was left of my heart had shattered in a field of thorns?

I leaned back in my chair and spun around, staring at a blank screen. Some had written poetry and articles; others expressed their pain through snippets and memes. Yet, here I was, an author who never lacked words, completely silent, not even a flicker of inspiration.

Giving up on my writing quest, I returned to the kitchen table and the unfinished puzzle. I am like this yellow piece that needs to fit into the current reality.

Hours later, I shuffled to my desk. Through the fog of uncertainty, words bubbled to the surface and guided me to the keyboard my fingers had abandoned weeks ago, or had it been months?

In a stream of consciousness, the words flew. I didn't read them. I wanted to purge the torment I carried: the infant found alive in the rubble, clutching his mother's protective hand; her soul was now elsewhere, wherever souls go when they are no longer here. The grandfather, who was rescued and grateful he survived until he found out none of his family was left, sat now, broken and alone. A victim's remains most likely nourished the weed growing from the debris.

The cursor blinked, but my eyes didn't; they stayed fixed on the letters and characters filling the screen.

The words that once flowed so freely now shifted in a new direction. I wrote about pain and loss, as well as resilience and hope that endured despite overwhelming odds.

The story I shared was about the unyielding and vibrant human spirit that refused to be silenced by thorns trying to contain it. It honored those who suffered, called out to those who listened, and reminded me that even in the darkest times, our voices could still rise together in a chorus of defiance and unity.

As I typed the last word, I felt a weight lift.

The puzzle stayed unfinished on the table, but the piece inside me had found its place. I was prepared to share my story and join the many voices echoing through humanity's halls.

Eventually, I returned to the yellow mandala on my kitchen table, but it was no longer just a distraction. It had become a reminder of the connections we shared, 'Under the Same Sky,' and the impact one small piece could have.

The gray, broken glass remained a symbol of resilience and the beauty of imperfection; it now held a yellow daffodil from my garden.

Thank you for reading Under the Same Sky. Please, leave a review at Amazon and Goodreads.

Other books by the Author

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Missing: But Never Forgotten

Shattered

All That's Left

Revenge is Mine

The Lies She Told

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